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**ECOPHOBIA: NATURE AS A DESTROYER IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S THE
GOD OF SMALL THINGS**

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Abstract:

Arundhati Roy is one of the well-known contemporary writers in Indian Fiction who is known for her greater artistic skill through her fiction exploring the themes of social discrimination, class and culture, Indian history and politics, forbidden love, betrayal, man-woman relationships, space, Diaspora and most importantly her concerns about Indian culture and ecology. The God of Small Things (1996) is the debut novel that describes the lives of people set in the remote rural space called Ayemenem. The narrative throws light upon how nature becomes the pivotal element that alters the lives of people in Ayemenem showcasing the shift from the ecophilic set up to ecophobic. The novel primarily focuses on nature, environment, ecology which become one of the most essential features of narrative. The novel narrates the gradual change in the lives of people as modernisation, urbanisation and industrialisation encroach the peace, purity and serenity of nature of Ayemenem. The present paper attempts to examine the projection of ecophobia that Roy narrates in this novel. Due to the advent of modernisation, urbanisation, liberalisation and trade unionism the ecology is exploited and the same ecology and geography turn a destructor of living and non-living in Ayemenem. The paradise of Ayemenem is lost due to knowledge like Adam and Eve lose their Garden of Eden.

Keywords: *Ecology, Ecophobia, Nature, Industrialisation, etc.*

Introduction:

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is a family sagatha that depicts the lives of people in Ayemenem, a small place on the banks of the Meenachal. The characters are connected with Ayemenem and the Meenachal. The entire narrative moves around Ayemenem and the Meenachal, therefore, ecology becomes common and inseparable space from the narrative. The present paper attempts to examine the instances of ecophobia in *The God of Small Things* as the characters experience the wrath of nature. The variant instances of nature's anger, destruction and its impact on human lives bring forth the ecophobia in the novel. The geographical space that nurtures the people in Ayemenem House brings a catastrophe to the peace and harmony of the Ayemenem.

Illustrations:

The God of Small Things illustrates the Ayemenem, a symbolic place as all the characters in the novel come to heal themselves to this peaceful place. The author enunciates all the human acts that take



place in the Ayemenem. In other words, Arundhati Roy projects the Ayemenem as a paradise for the natives. They live happily within this paradise. The serenity of the ecology heals them from their worries, sorrows, pain and trauma. Nature is all encompassing that prevails everywhere in this space. But the same nature becomes destructive as the characters hurt ecology. The writer shows that the characters in the narrative exploit nature for their economic and mundane prosperity. They move to spaces, even beyond the national borders. They return to their native with altered perspective and change the nature. The nature, on the other hand, destroys their plans, often times, human lives. Thus, ecophobia becomes the pivotal tenet of the novel.

Arundhati Roy explores the female characters more in her novel compared to their male counterparts. These female characters develop a close liaison with the ecology of the Ayemenem. They amalgamate with the environment around them. For instance, Ammu always connects herself with the Meenachal river. The river symbolizes flowing, life and vibrance. Ammu's connectivity with the pickle factory, the rubber plantation and with Velutha exhibits her rootedness with the ecology. Similarly, the same ecology projects her gloom, anger, frustration and failures. These tenets of the nature vocalise ecophobia. Ecophobia expresses the fear of ecology and natural world.

The writer describes rich environment of natural setup of the Ayemenem House situated in Kottayam district in the state of Kerala in India. Basically, Kerala is widely known for the ecological richness, biodiversity and virgin forests. The novel portrays Ayemenem as a metaphor for the ecological richness. Similarly, the writer introduces the upsurge of Modernisation and globalisation that affect nature. In the Post-Colonial era, the World Bank has been generous in sanctioning loans for various purposes. The farmers get loans for crops, seeds, pesticides and insecticides. No doubt, the agricultural produce increases but the abundant use of pesticides and insecticides affect soil, water and aquaculture. Majority of rural sites which were once rich with ecology, now showcase the degradation as machines and vehicles replace the natural farms. The writer observes the ecophobic conditions, "Some days he walked along the banks of the river that smelled of shit, and pesticides bought with World Bank loans. Most of the fish had died. The ones that survived suffered from fin-rot and had broken out in boils" (Roy, TGST, 13). Further, the author comments on the evils that are brought by Modernization. These are great threats to nature, ecology, peace, culture and the rural simplicity. The subjects in the novel experience the outbreak of mundane lifestyle that suffocates ecology:

Trains. Traffic. Music. The Stock Market. A dam had burst and savage waters swept everything up in a swirling. Comets, violins, parades, loneliness, clouds, beards, bigots, lists, flags, earthquakes, despair were all swept up in a scrambled swirling.

And Estha, walking on the riverbank, couldn't feel the wetness of the rain, or the suddenshudder of the cold puppy that had temporarily adopted him and squelched at his side. He walked past the old mangosteen tree and up to the edge of a laterite spur that jutted out into the river. He squatted on his shoes made rude, sucking sounds. The cold puppy shivered - and watched (Roy, TGST, 15).

This instance indicates how the outbreak of Modernisation threatens the ecology. Further, the author showcases how humans response to the distant ecological devastations. The modern generation distances from nature. They understand nature, geography and ecology through virtual modes. Modernisation presents both-the benefits and flaws. Modernisation benefits the humanity for sensing and witnessing several things that happen anywhere in the world, and in invites flaw because the human distance themselves from nature. People prefer to stay at homes, distancing themselves from the ecology and watching television. For instance, Baby Kochamma gets attached emotionally with the famines shown on the television. In a way, she develops a virtual eco-culture that prevails



somewhere away from her residence, makes her worry about the sufferings of the people caught in famine and genocide. Roy explicates the virtual ecoculture propagated by television and Baby Kochamma's emotional attachment and reaction to the virtual ecophobia:

She was frightened by the BBC famines and Television wars that she encountered while she channel surfed. Her old fears of the Revolution and the Marxist-Leninist menace had been rekindled by new television worries about the growing numbers of desperate and dispossessed people. She viewed ethnic cleansing, famine and genocide as direct threats to her furniture (Roy, TGST, 28).

Subsequently, Pappachi had bought the Plymouth from an Englishman in Munnar. He wears a woollen coat suit like an Englishman, working as an Imperial Entomologist at the Pusa Institute. After Independence his designation is changed to Joint Director, Entomology and at his retirement, he is elevated as the Director. Further, the writer states that Pappachi cannot clean the moth as his discovery. His moth was named after the acting Director of the Department of Entomology. This failure of not having the patent of discoveries in his name tortures him creating ecophobia, haunting him and creating an eco-psychology:

In the years to come, even though he had been ill-humoured, long before he discovered the moth, Pappachi's Moth was held responsible for his black moods and sudden bouts of temper. It's pernicious ghost-grey, furry and with unusually dense dorsal tufts-haunted every house that he ever lived in. It tormented him and his children and his children's children (Roy, TGST, 49).

Gradually, the author shows how Chacko attempts to fly an airplane in Ayemenem. In every month, except during monsoons, he orders and after assembling them, he attempts to fly it. The aircraft crashes after a minute or two affecting nature and the crops. The writer brings to light the ecophobia as the ecology is disturbed by machines:

When it was ready, he would take Estha and Rahel to the rice-fields in Nattakom to help him fly it. It never flew for more than a minute. Month after month, Chacko's carefully constructed plans crashed in the slushgreen paddy fields into which Estha and Rahel would spurt, like trained retrievers, to salvage the remains (Roy, TGST, 56).

In addition to this, the author attracts her readers' attention towards the famine of the 1960s. She also talks about the failure of monsoon in Kerala resulting in collective hunger and death of people. The famine is an instance of ecophobia as it triggers suffering, decay and death, "Kerala was reeling in the aftermath of famine and a failed monsoon. People were dying. Hunger had to be very high up on any Government list of priorities" (Roy, TGST, 68). Further, Trade Union symbolizes the collective anger, dissatisfaction and hatred of the common people against the owners of estate in particular, and ecology in general. The author narrates ecophobia as a pregnant silence in every space, "Silence filled the car like a saturated sponge. *Washed-up* cut like a knife through a soft thing. The sun shone with a shuddering sigh. This was the trouble with families" (Roy, TGST, 70).

Further, Roy uncovers the past by stating the loss of an eye of Velutha's father-Vellya Paapen, a toddy tapper. The loss of his eye brings forth ecophobia as ecology harms Vellya Paapen, "He had a glass eye. He had been shaping a block of granite with a hammer when a chip flew into his left eye and sliced right through it" (Roy, TGST, 73). This happenstance shows the suffering of Vellya Paapen through his glass eye and how the ecology unintentionally troubles the innocent people.



Subsequently, the author records how Kuttappen, the older brother of Velutha, damaged his spine after falling from a coconut tree. He is paralysed and unable to work. This happenstance indicates ecophobia as ecology works against humans, “Then Kuttappen, his older brother, fell off a coconut tree and damaged his spine. He was paralysed and unable to work” (Roy, TGST, 77). Consequently, Ayemenem House showcases encroachment of ecology as it is not habituated by humans for a long time. The gradual settlement of dirt, filth, dead insects and the layer of oily film on the utensils indicate ecophobic advances of nature in the Ayemenem House. The long forsaken human objects become part of nature. Slowly, nature embosses its marks on them through its agents:

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 windowpanes.

Midges whizzed teapots. Dead insects lay in empty vases.

The floor was sticky. White walls had turned an uneven grey.

Brass hinges and doorhandles were dull and greasy to the touch. Infrequently used plug points were clogged with grime. Lightbulbs had a film of oil on them. The only things that shone were the giant cockroaches that scurried around like varnished gofers on a film set (Roy, TGST, 88).

Further, the writer also narrates ecophobia through the instance of the crunch of red meat sticking to a five rupee note at a butcher shop. This is very symbolic as it highlights that man has gained money by exploiting nature. Also, the butcher symbolises Man who exploits nature. Roy pinpoints ecophobia with this small instance of butcher shop that usurps natural space and the lives of animals for selfish motives, “Once when Kochu Maria took her to the butcher's shop, Rahel noticed that the green five-rupee note that he gave them had a tiny blob of red meat on it. Kochu Maria wiped the blob away with her thumb. The juice left a red smear. She put the money into her bodice. Meat-smelling blood money” (Roy, TGST, 95).

For instance, when Ammu and Rahel visit the clinic of Dr Verghese Verghese, they are waiting in the waiting room for the doctor and the writer expresses ecophobia in skilful way as the ceiling fan rotates the air spins. Though, the example is very insignificant, the language is poignant in explicating ecophobia, “The slow ceiling fan sliced the thick, frightened air into an ending spiral that spun slowly to the floor like the peeled skin of an endless potato” (Roy, TGST, 132). In the Ayemenem house, the members are tied with human bond-artificial and away from nature as they are in the house and not in the home. At gatherings, serious ideas remain unsaid. The writer conveys ecophobia, “And the Air was full of Thoughts and Things to Say. But at times like these, only the Small Things are ever said. The Big Things lurk unsaid inside” (Roy, TGST, 142). Further, when Margaret Kochamma's greeting at the airport with her divorced husband, the writer projects the serious and sad ecology outside. For her, the air is sad whereas for Chacko, it is fresh. The ecophobia and the inner conflict of Margaret Kochamma reciprocate. The writer writes, “But around her, the Air was sad, somehow. And behind the smile in her eyes, the Grief was a fresh, shining blue. Because of a calamitous car crash. Because of a Joe-shaped Hole in the universe” (Roy, TGST, 143).

Frequently, Pappachi is a researcher who collects specimens from the nature to study them and register them as patents. In his study, he had pinned butterflies and moths that are decomposed. Nature takes away its products by decomposing them-turning them into the elements of nature. The writer showcases that the tiny elements of nature are bigger in reality when they are under scrutiny. The shadows of the ants seem bigger. Roy projects how fungus encroaches every part of the room. The ecophobia is evident in the slow decomposition of Pappachi's study:



In Pappachi's study, mounted butterflies and moths had disintegrated into small heaps of iridescent dust that powdered the bottom of their glass display cases, leaving the pins that had impaled them naked. Cruel. The room was rank with fungus and disuse. An old neon-green hula hoop hung from a wooden peg on the wall, a huge saint's discarded halo.... on the top shelf, the leather binding on Pappachi's set of *The Insect Wealth of India* had lifted off each book and buckled like corrugated asbestos. Silverfish tunneled through the pages, burrowing arbitrarily from species to species, turning organized information into yellow lace (Roy, TGST, 155).

Similarly, the writer also projects the dense air at the crematorium. As the church in Ayemenem, refuses to bury the body of Ammu, Chacko takes it to the crematorium where the unclaimed dead bodies are cremated. Here, the writer draws a parallelism between the dead cockroach and the dead body of Ammu. As the dead cockroach remains unclaimed, Ammu's body too remains unclaimed by the religion. Chacko takes it to the electric crematorium which symbolizes a solution for the unclaimed dead bodies that do not deserve a space in ecology through a proper burial in a churchyard or cemetery. Further, the writer also hints at the rotten and run down air of desertedness. The electric crematorium has fire from all side that consumes the dead bodies within no time. The fire represents ecophobia as it devours the dead body of Ammu in no time. Roy narrates the fierce fire that is ecophilic as she says:

... the eternal fire became a red roaring. The heat lunged out at them like a famished beast. Then Rahel's Ammu was fed to it. Her hair, her skin, her smile. Her voice. The way she used Kipling to love her children before putting them to bed: *We be of one blood, thou and I*. Her goodnight kiss. The way she held their faces steady with one hand (squashed-cheeked, fish-mouthed) while she parted and combed their hair with the other. The way she held knickers out for Rahel to climb into. *Left leg, right leg*. All this was fed to the beast, and it was satisfied (Roy, TGST, 163).

Gradually, Nature turns unpredictable and strange. Even the products of nature add to the fierceness of nature. For instance, when Rahel observes Estha going through the gate, she expresses ecophobia, "It was midmorning and about to rain again. The green- in the last moments of that strange, glowing, pre-shower light-was fierce. A cock crowed in the distant and its voice separated into two. Like a sole peeling off an old shoe" (Roy, TGST, 164).

The Ayemenem House stands as a symbol of ecology as it has seen many generations and witnessed several lives like nature. For the present generation Ayemenem House is dark and mossy due to age and rain. As time passes, the Ayemenem House becomes obscure as nature. The writer projects ecophobia through the gloomy building, "The steep, titled roof had grown dark and mossy with age and rain. The triangular wooden frames fitted into the gables were intricately carved, the light that slanted through them and fell in patterns on the floor was full of secrets. Wolves. Flowers. Iguanas. Changing shape as the sun moved through the sky. Dying punctually, at dusk (Roy, TGST, 165).

Gradually, the ecophilic garden turns ecophobic in the night. It is not the darkness that swallows nature but the human sorrow that makes the garden grotesque. The writer amplifies the ecophobia that prevails in the night in the same garden in a brief but poignant way, "Gloom swallowed the garden. Whole. Like a python" (Roy, TGST, 191). Oftentimes, Estha sits into his room looking at the darkness that prevails in the garden. Darkness disappears as the moon rises and the garden comes to the light. Everything becomes crystal clear. The garden reappears and Rahel enjoys



sitting in the moonlight in the garden. In this instance, both the moonlight and the garden prove healers to Rahel. Further, when Rahel enters the pickle factory, she finds the air heavy. This heaviness of the air with moisture signals ecophobia. “The air was heavy with moisture, wet enough for fish to swim in” (Roy, TGST, 192).

Even, Velutha brings the connectivity of ecology to Ayemenem House. Ammu's illegitimate relationship with Velutha brings darkness of shame and eruption on Ayemenem House. Velutha introduces sorrows in the lives of Ammu and her twin children. Arundhati portrays ecophobia, “He left behind a Hole in the Universe through which darkness poured like liquid tar. Through which their mother followed without even turning to wave good-bye. She left them behind, spinning in the dark, with no moorings, in a place with no foundation” (Roy, TGST, 191-192). Roy articulates Rahel's trauma with the imagery from ecology that presents ecophobia, “Rahel stopped and turned around, and on her heart a drab moth with unusually dense dorsal tufts unfurled its predatory wings” (Roy, TGST, 198).

Roy adds certain stories to amplify ecology in Ayemenem House. Ammu plays a song from a film called *Chemmeen*. This song elaborates the story of a poor girl who is forced to marry a fisherman from the neighbouring beach. In reality, she loves someone else. But, as the fisherman finds out about his new wife's old lover, he sets into his little boat in the storm, only to meet his doom. The storm, the wind, the darkness and the sea represent ecophobia as the sailor meets his death. The writer chronicles how ecology kills the guilty and innocent alike. The narrator writes:

... he sets out to see in his little boat though he knows that a storm is brewing. It's dark, and the wind rises. A whirlpool spins up from the ocean bed. There is storm music, and the fisherman drowns, sucked to the bottom of the sea in the vortex of the whirlpool. The lovers make a suicide pact, and are found the next morning, washed up on the beach with their arms around each other. So everybody dies. The fisherman, his wife, her lover, and a shark that has no part in the story, but dies anyway. The sea claims them all (Roy, TGST, 219).

For instance, when Ammu is feeling suffocated at her home, she feels the entire nature is entering her body. Everything enters her. The writer projects ecophobia through this minute description, “That her cup was full of dust. That the air, the sky, the trees, the sun, the rain, the light and darkness were all slowly turning to sand. That sand would fill her nostrils, her lungs, her mouth. Would pull her down, leaving on the surface a spinning swirl like crabs leave when they borrow downwards on a beach” (Roy, TGST, 222).

Subsequently, Roy chronicles the adventures of Rahel and Estha who explore Ayemenem in the dark. Various seasons have different impressions on the ecology of Ayemenem. The writer goes to the extent of sensing and registering the sound of silence in the deserted wet roads of Ayemenem. This description adds to the ecophobic canon of the text: “The sound of the Chenda mushroomed over the temple, accentuating the silence of the encompassing night. The lonely, wet road. The watching trees. Rahel, breathless, holding a coconut, stepped into the temple compound through the wooden doorway in the high white boundary wall. ... the compound was littered with moons, one in each mud puddle” (Roy, TGST, 228).

Further, Margaret Kochamma anticipates how the funeral was a sad event. The nature anticipates her fear and phobia that hauls over the Ayemenem House. It is after the death of Sophie Mol nature frightened her, “And how at night the bush crickets had sounded like creaking stars and amplified the fear and gloom that hung over the Ayemenem House” (Roy, TGST, 263). Besides, the writer also narrates how ecology affects adversely the machines. For instance, Baby Kochamma's car



remains unused firmly on the ground. Every rainy season the old car settles more firmly. The writer narrates the ecophobic impact on the car, “With every monsoon, the old car settled more firmly into the ground. Like an angular, arthritic hen settling stiffly on her clutch of eggs. With no intention of ever getting up. Grass grew around its flat tyres. The Paradise Pickles & Preserves signboard rotted and fell inwards like a collapsed crown” (Roy, TGST, 295). Subsequently, the police in their encounter to catch Velutha as the murderer of Sophie Mol. They encroach the History House in the dark. Ecology around the Heart of Darkness projects ecophobia: Then the sunlight was fractured by thin trunks of tilting trees. Dark of Heartness tiptoed into the Heart of Darkness. The sound of stridulating crickets swelled. Grey squirrels streaked down mottled trunks of rubber trees that slanted towards the sun. Old scars slashed across their bark. Sealed. Healed. Untapped (Roy, TGST, 306).

To conclude, Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* highlights the bond between ecology and characters. The novel documents the echoes, calls and the cries of the Earth. It also showcases human exploitation of nature. Roy documents how ecology replenishes and at times, attacks its destroyers. The subjects in the narrative assimilate, distance, suffer and succumb to ecology. The novel proliferate the family saga of the Ayemenem House on the banks of the Meenachal wherein ecology plays heralding role in the lives of these characters. If one removes nature, ecology or the geographical space from the novel, it remains just the skeleton of man-woman relationship. Thus, ecology, nature and geography, especially the ecophobia become the flesh and bold of the narrative.

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