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## Mapping Ecofeminism in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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### Abstract:

The present paper seeks to explore and analyse *The God of Small Things* through the lens of ecofeminist theory and practice. The novel addresses different forms of inequities, which transcend the peripheries of locality, region and nation, to emerge in the global scenario, thus not limited by temporal or spatial constraints. This study is also an exploration into the ways nature has been commodified and exploited to serve the needs of the growing tourism industry – an indication of the adverse impact of rapid globalization. There has been an attempt to unmask layers of hierarchies which perpetuate dualisms as white/black, male/female, upper caste/untouchables, culture/nature, adults/children, where one term is privileged over the other. The marginalized characters in the novel are enmeshed in various discursive and social formations that shape their identity. However, despite the oppression faced by these characters, some have the nerve to articulate resistance, discernible in the form of transgression of the codified accepted behaviour and values imposed by the dominant classes.

**Keywords:** Ecofeminism, dualisms, discursive and social formation, globalization, resistance, transgression

Ecofeminism is a multi-layered and multi-disciplinary term encompassing a wide array of concerns resulting from different forms of oppression. The term was introduced by Francoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Le Feminisme ou la Mort* [*Feminism or Death*] published in 1974. Broadly speaking, it is a social movement which wants to dismantle the hierarchies (based on gender, class, race, nature) created by the dominant patriarchal order. All ecofeminists strongly believe that the oppression of women as well as the devaluation of nature run closely parallel to each other and the patriarchal order is the root cause behind their exploitation. Though different wings of ecofeminism strive to end the dualist hierarchical paradigms, yet they adopt varied means to bring about a restructuring of the existing power structures. Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies define Ecofeminism as a “woman-identified movement” and state: “Ecofeminism is about connectedness and wholeness of theory and practice. . . . We see the devastation, of the earth and her beings by the corporate warriors, and the threat of nuclear annihilation by the military warriors, as feminist concerns” (14).

During the 1970s, the feminist concerns merged with the environmental concerns and many women committed themselves to the amelioration of global ecological crisis as well as upliftment of women's stature. In the words of Plumwood: “Feminism has undergone major conflict, transformation and enrichment as a result of its encounters with other forms of domination and their theories, especially those of race and class” (Intro 1). This interplay of convoluted and interconnected forms of oppression continues to arouse activism from within the diverse strands of ecofeminism. For Starhawk and many other ecofeminists, ecofeminism is “also based on the recognition that these two forms of domination are bound up with class exploitation, racism, colonialism, and neo-colonialism” (qtd. in Gaard and Murphy 3). The

present paper seeks to explore and analyse *The God of Small Things* through the lens of ecofeminist theory and practice. The novel addresses different forms of inequities, which transcend the peripheries of locality, region and nation, to emerge in the global scenario, thus not limited by temporal or spatial constraints. Roy is a social and political activist whose involvement in human rights programmes and environmental causes is well-known. She has been an active opponent of globalization and a vehement critic of neo-imperialism. She, along with activist Medha Patkar, campaigned veraciously against the Narmada Dam Project, objecting strongly to the large number of displacement of people with little or no compensation. Considering Roy's feminist as well as environmental concerns, it is evident that her writings must follow the trajectory of her ideological base. The present study attempts to answer the question whether an ecofeminist study enhances explorations of connections and differences between culture and nature, and across human differences of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation – connections and differences that affect our relationships with nature and with each other. The study also proposes to uncover ways in which women are culturally perceived by and represented in the society, and often stifled by this act of perception which frequently labels them as inferior to men. This study is also an exploration into the ways nature has been commodified and exploited to serve the needs of the growing tourism industry – an indication of the adverse impact of rapid globalization.

Roy has unmasked layers of hierarchies which perpetuate such dualisms as white/black, male/female, upper caste/untouchables, culture/nature, adults/children, where one term is privileged over the other. Besides unravelling the sufferings of the subaltern classes, Roy sensitizes the readers about the devastating effects of tourism business masquerading as globalization. She exposes a society wherein whiteness and colonial legacy is sought after; where the family structure does not grant equality and autonomy to women; where 'Love Laws' change standards according to the caste, gender, and social status of the person; where globalization has crumbled the old landscape beyond recognition; and where tourism industry has created a stronghold over the debris of fragile nature. In the novel, race, class, and caste have been used to justify slavery; sanction commercial exploitation; and bolster arguments maintaining the need for patriarchal imperialism. However, the characters in the novel show some degree of grit and resistance by crossing the fixed boundaries, making them fluid and porous. Transgressions of characters have been portrayed to be subversive, occurring outside the accepted boundaries of the institution of marriage or sibling relation, challenging the "Love laws" established by orthodox society. The novel entails a scathing interrogation of the basic values and structures of Indian society – societal pressures which can be stifling to a person's identity and the rigid norms which rob one of one's agency.

The first form of hierarchical dualism results from the deep-seated loyalty towards the legacy of colonial powers. Though India is politically free at the time when the novel is set (1967), yet the bourgeois society has tried to maintain its supremacy by assimilating the Western culture. The white skin epitomizes beauty and virtue. The history, language, culture, and beliefs of the white colonizers are imposed on the once-colonized people and considered superior to the local indigenous culture. The story revolves around the changing fortunes and circumstances of the bourgeois Ipe family. It chronicles the arrival of Margaret and Sophie to Ayemenem from England and relates how by being white-skinned, they naturally become endearing figures among the majority of the Ipe family members. Pappachi (Reverend John Ipe's son and the grandfather of twins, Estha and Rahel) adapts to the Occidental style of living by driving a Plymouth and smoking a cigar. Baby Kochamma (Pappachi's sister) and Pappachi are befitting examples of loyal anglophiles who take pride in imbibing all mannerisms, values, and lifestyle of the English. Pappachi refuses to believe his daughter,

Ammu, when she tells that her husband's white employer wanted her sexual favour in lieu of securing her husband's job. This act hints at the 'objectification' of a woman's body which can be bartered like an exchange commodity. Pappachi "didn't believe that an Englishman, any Englishman, would covet another man's wife" (42). On one hand, whiteness is associated with goodness whereas on the other, black is symbolic of evil and filth. In the novel, Kochu Maria, the dwarfish maid, internalizes whiteness to have a superior aesthetic value as she is stupefied by the whiteness of Sophie Mol. She teases Rahel by saying that Sophie Mol will be next Kochamma when she grows up and she would be benevolent enough to raise her salary and gift her nylon saris for Onam. It is imperative to understand how the whiteness of skin is equated with virtue and benevolence by Kochu Maria. Rahel shrugs this feeling off by saying that she will have been living in Africa by then. At the mention of Africa, Kochu Maria shows her disdain by asserting that "Africa's full of ugly black people and mosquitoes" (185). Roy discloses how our own inferiority as the dark-skinned people and superiority of the whites have been so internalized by the Indians. Though Rahel wants to be experimental when she expresses her desire to live in Africa, yet the twins' conditioned fascination for *The Jungle Book*, their inherited reverence for Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, their love for *The Sound of Music*, and their ability to use the English language with ease allude to their colonial legacy. The whole family including Chacko, Baby Kochamma, Ammu, Rahel, and Estha go to Abhilash Talkies to watch 'The Sound of Music' and they watch the white actors in stupefaction. Roy comments about the movie: "He loved her (Julie Andrews), she loved him, they loved the children, the children loved them. They all loved each other. They were clean, white children, and their beds were soft . . ." (105). Roy satirises the mentality of the bourgeois class to act as the whites to uphold their elitism. In the novel, days before Chacko's British-born ex-wife Margaret and her daughter, Sophie have to arrive in Ayemenem, the Ipe family gears up and motivates the twins - Estha and Rahel - to adopt 'sophisticated' English manners of speaking and behaving: "The rehearsals had been rehearsed. It was the Day of the Play. The culmination of *What Will Sophie Mol Think? Week*" (136).

The novel traces the misfortunes of Ammu and her twin children, Rahel and Estha. The three characters are cornered by the family as well as society. She is not given the privilege of higher education by her father, Pappachi, while her brother Chacko is sent to Oxford for higher studies. In order to escape her abusive father, Pappachi, Ammu enters into an impulsive and hasty marriage bond. Later she discovers to her utmost shock that her husband is an alcoholic who beats her and even attempts to coerce her into prostitution. After giving birth to twins, Estha and Rahel, she leaves her husband and returns to her parents' home, where she is an unwelcome guest. She is also subjugated due to the family structure and inheritance laws customarily prevalent among the Syrian Christians where a girl does not own any right to her father's wealth. Chacko asserts his sole right on the family business when he expels Ammu after her relation with Velutha gets known to all: "Get out of my house before I break every bone in your body! My house, my pineapples, my pickle" (225). Later, she develops a love-affair with a 'Paravan' Velutha as a counter-attack on the society's strict codification of the accepted behaviour.

As the Christian Creation story goes, Eve is the transgressor who brings about fall of Adam as well as humanity by daring to eat the "forbidden fruit." In her inquisitiveness and audacity, she transgresses the will of Almighty. Adam is shown to be a lesser-guilty accomplice as he merely follows suit because of the fear of losing Eve and being left alone. In the novel, Ammu (Eve) and Velutha (Adam) are the transgressors who violate the rigid societal norms and conventions. The binaries – woman/man, black/white, untouchable/upper caste, nature/culture – are so deep-seated in the minds of the people of Ayemenem that any crossing or over-lapping of set boundaries is unacceptable and punitive. Velutha is at the

periphery of the mainstream Syrian-Christian society of Ayemenem for being a 'paravan'. He is a subaltern figure because of his low caste and dark complexion whereas Ammu is marginalized for being a 'woman'. As the popular Creation myth goes, Eve's identity is solely wrapped up in her relationship to Adam, and she has been deemed to be subservient as Almighty created her out of Adam's rib to serve as his helpmate. Some early Fathers of the Church took the view that because Eve tempted Adam to eat of the fatal fruit, they held her responsible for the Fall of man, and all subsequent women to be the first sinners.

Ammu (Eve) assumes the guilt for having a liaison with a pariah which eventually results in his death in the prison. Ammu has been portrayed as a rebellious and out-spoken daughter of the family whose act of defiance against the established social order starts when she marries a Bengali Hindu man, much to the disdain and despair of her conservative Syrian-Christian family. When Velutha is unjustifiably accused of being responsible for the accidental drowning of Sophie Mol, Ammu's outrageous action of going to the police station and arguing against the detention of this lower caste, lower class subaltern is again an act of resistance against the smugness and hypocrisy of the societal laws. Ammu is an 'outlaw' who does not fit into the closeted and stereotypical model of an 'ideal Indian woman'. It is ironical that though Christianity does not believe in hierarchies maintained on the basis of caste or class, yet the Syrian-Christians are embedded in class hierarchies (inherited from their Hindu lineage), and any deviation from the established norms may invite strict retribution. Ammu and Velutha are the victims of the stringent social order where any association with a paravan, especially sexual encounter, is visibly forbidden. Thus, the upper caste assumes the role of Almighty and delivers a 'just' and 'legitimate' punishment for the transgressors. In the Christian myth, Adam and Eve show a great degree of remorse and have to undergo penance when they are sent on the earth. However, no such act of self-abasement or mortification is allowed to or even willed by Ammu and Velutha. Ammu nurtures an innate rebellious streak in her temperament and wishes to see the same dissenting feelings in Velutha. On their way to Cochin, Ammu and her family are confronted by the Communist marchers. One of the marchers with a flag in his hand is Velutha whom Rahel recognizes. Though Ammu forbids her to utter anything, yet "[s]he hoped it had been him that had raised his flag and knotted arm in anger. She hoped that under his careful cloak of cheerfulness, he housed a living, breathing anger against the smug, ordered world that she so raged against" (175-76). Ammu is a blend of the opposing qualities: "An unmixable mix. The infinite tenderness of motherhood and the reckless rage of a suicide bomber" (4).

Roy takes a critical stance at the hypocritical standards of society where males (barring the outcastes) are the privileged lot whereas women are expected to take up the pre-ordained subservient positions. In the novel, persistent thrashing and physical assault by men over their wives is one form of victimization which prevents women from achieving self-actualization and autonomy. Mammachi is repeatedly beaten up by her husband Pappachi, an Imperial Entomologist. At Pappachi's funeral, Ammu tells her kids that Mammachi is crying as she was used to his presence and not because she loved him. Ammu maintains that Mammachi was ". . . used to being beaten from time to time" (50). Rosemary Ruether traces the various tactics through which males reduce women to a mere 'commodity': "The reduction of woman to the body-object of male use is enforced by a vast network of control, ranging from the most subtle to the most brutal. Direct physical assault is certainly the ultimate weapon that males assume they hold in reserve over women" (147). She maintains further: "Control over woman's body involves objectifying woman's body and viewing it as a commodity. This involves various mutilations; woman's body is twisted and distorted to make it an object of display and conspicuous consumption" (148). After Sophie Mol's funeral, Ammu reaches Kottayam Police station to give her statement about the series of

events leading to Sophie Mol's death. Inspector Thomas Mathew humiliates her by calling her veshya and her children as illegitimate. There is visible lust in his eyes: "He stared at Ammu's breasts as he spoke" (8). He taps at her breasts with a baton as "though he was choosing mangoes from a basket" (8)

Roy's feminist vision is discernible when she portrays Ammu to be in a state of predicament between choosing her maiden name and husband's name as in both the cases she is 'interpellated' into taking up a pre-destined 'subject' position. Roy voices discontent and believes that women cannot feel liberated as they are enmeshed in various discursive and social formations that shape their identity, and cannot act as powerful independent agents with self-produced identities. It is important to note that all female characters in the novel are not victims. There is no clear-cut demarcation between the perpetrator and the victim. Baby Kochamma and Mammachi stay somewhere in the 'liminal space' where they are victims as well as the perpetrators of exploitation. Mammachi does not hesitate to keep up the hypocritical stance regarding Chacko's libertine relationships with multiple women working in factory and Ammu's affair with Velutha. To make up for Chacko's debauchery, she maintains: "He can't help having a Man's Needs" (168). Mammachi has a separate entrance built for Chacko's room so that the "objects of his 'Needs' wouldn't have to go traipsing *through* the house" (169). Her double standards can be further noticed when she secretly slips money to keep them happy.

If Ammu is on the margin, her children are even more so. They are "Half-Hindu Hybrids whom no self-respecting Syrian Christian would even marry" (44), in the eyes of Baby Kochamma. Rahel and Estha undergo severe psychological trauma after they are separated from each other. After Ammu's death, Rahel is largely neglected by Mammachi, Chacko, and Baby Kochamma, resulting in her unruly and weird behaviour in schools, for which she is often blacklisted and expelled. Roy underscores the importance given to the denial of body in Christianity. Females are considered to be the repositories of sin for being related to bodily functions rather than mind or spirituality. Rahel is caught for colliding deliberately with her seniors to know if breasts actually hurt: "In that Christian institution, breasts are not acknowledged. They weren't supposed to exist, and if they didn't could they hurt?" (16). Roy gives a psychological insight into the mind of an eleven year old motherless girl who is as inquisitive and insolent as her mother was. In a way, this is an act of resistance put up by a young girl who refuses to fit into the stereotypical roles ascribed to her gender by the dominant patriarchal order. Her acts of smoking and setting fire to her Housemistress's stolen false hairbun are taken by others "as though she didn't know how to be a girl" (17). Rahel's life is steeped in an existential angst and crisis which is carried on into her adulthood as she keeps trying to create meaning out of her absurd, meaningless existence. Rahel ponders: "Perhaps, Ammu, Estha, and she were the worst transgressors. . . . They all crossed into forbidden territory. They all tampered with the laws that who should be loved and how. And how much" (31). Rahel's personal despair does not let her form a healthy relationship with her husband, Larry McCaslin. He is exasperated by her indifference and emptiness, and the marriage ultimately ends in divorce. In the case of Estha, he pays the price for being Ammu's child by being separated from her. Over the years, an eerie silence creeps in and overpowers Estha: "It had been a gradual winding down and closing shop. A barely noticeable quietening. As though he had simply run out of conversation and had nothing left to say"(10). When the twins meet after Estha is re-returned to Ayemenem house, the bottled-up emotions find a release by the way of an incestuous consummation between the twins. This act is again an act of resistance against the oppressive forces which have silenced Estha and crippled Rahel's emotional health.

Roy exposes manipulative and degenerate politicians who scapegoat innocent people for narrow self-interests and maintain their hold over the bastion of local power by pitting one against the other. Though outwardly a reformist movement, yet Marxism never overtly questions the double standards of the traditional caste-ridden community. Roy satirically remarks: “The Marxists worked from within the communal divides, never challenging, never appearing not to. They offered a cocktail revolution. A heady mix of Eastern Marxism and orthodox Hinduism, spiked with a shot of democracy” (66-67). Like the white colonial master, Comrade Pillai is an embodiment of all the unpleasant and fraudulent aspects of a degenerate political tradition. The irony is that Pillai belongs to the Communist party that serves to defend workers’ interests and exists on the vow to protect its members from all kind of socio-economic exploitation. However, Pillai’s leadership rests only on noisy yet empty rhetoric. He uses Velutha as a mere tool to win his battle against Paradise Pickles without any struggle.

The waves of oppression are diffused in the Ayemenem locale from multifarious channels. Among the other subaltern agents are the nature and the local cultures as both of these have been ‘commodified’. Neo-imperialism and globalization have made inroads into the once-quiet region of Ayemenem. According to Rosemary Ruether, today’s “globalization” is “simply the latest stage of Western colonialist imperialism” (*Integrating* 1). The novel traces the trajectory of its characters spanning over more than three decades, beginning from 1967 to twenty three years later, when Rahel and Estha come back to Ayemenem. Meanwhile, the whole landscape undergoes a change as the rapidly growing tourism business thrives on globalization spree. Kari Saipu’s house which is a witness to countless ‘histories’ – fortunes made and unmade – has been bought by a five star hotel chain which turns it into the hotel ‘Heritage’. Roy comments in an acerbic manner: “So there it was then, History and Literature enlisted by commerce. Kurtz and Karl Marx joining palms to greet rich guests as they stepped off the boat” (127). The small town of Ayemenem turns into a commercialized place with “the fragile façade of greenery” (128). In addition to the commercialization, the river Meenachal is also adulterated. Rahel notices on her return to Ayemenem after many years: “. . . it greeted her with a ghastly skull’s smile, with holes where teeth had been, and a limp hand raised from a hospital bed” (124). The river shrinks from its original size: “Once it had had the power to evoke fear. To change lives. But now its teeth were drawn, its spirit spent. It was just a slow, sludging green ribbon lawn that ferried fetid garbage to the sea. Bright plastic bags blew across its viscous, weedy surface like subtropical flying-flowers” (124). The level of toxicity seems to have risen well beyond replacement levels: “The view from the hotel was beautiful, but here too the water was thick and toxic” (125). Estha also notices on his return that “the banks of the river that smelled of shit, and pesticides bought with World Bank loans” (13). There is a loss of bio-diversity as “[m]ost of the fish had died. The ones that survived suffered from fin-rot and had broken out in boils” (13).

The growing tourism industry has entrenched its roots in Ayemenem, and eroded the local cultures as well as nature. Mies and Shiva rightly state:

Local cultures are deemed to have ‘value’ only when they have been fragmented and these fragments transformed into saleable goods for a world market. Only when food becomes ‘ethnic food’, music ‘ethnic music’, and traditional tales ‘folklore’ and when skills are harnessed to the production of ‘ethnic’ objects for the tourist industry, can the capital accumulation process benefit from these local cultures. (Mies and Shiva 13)

Roy describes how the Kathakali dancers compromise with the sanctity of their dance performances: “Their truncated swimming pool performances. Their turning to tourism to stave off starvation” (229). To the Kathakali Man, the stories enacted in their performances are “his children and his childhood” (229). Roy captures the poignancy of these dancers who have no option left but to reduce their dance form to a mere commodity to please the tourists. He (a kathakali dancer) is a misfit for other jobs like those of a clerk or a conductor. It is a matter of pity that “[i]n despair he turns to tourism. He enters the market. He hawks the only thing he owns” (230) and “[h]e becomes a regional flavour” (231). The tourists are enticed to enjoy the “Regional Flavour” (127) in the form of “truncated kathakali performances” (127). Roy laments: “So the ancient stories were collapsed and amputated. Six-hour classics were reduced to twenty-minute cameos” (127). Roy portrays how the sanctity of kathakali performances is spoiled by the tourists, for whom these are nothing more than regional flavour to be savoured temporarily: “While Kunti revealed her secret to Karna on the river bank, courting couples rubbed suntan oil on each other” (127). However, the Kathakali men try to undergo a self-penance by enacting their stories in the temples and by pleading guilty to the crime of spoiling their pious stories: “On their way back from the Heart of Darkness, they stopped at the temple to ask pardon of their gods. To apologize for corrupting their stories. For encasing their identities. Misappropriating their lives” (229).

The ideas and ideals of Roy’s feminist and environmental vision have a world-wide diffusion; aimed to bring about a ‘metanoia’ and enable people to reflect critically on their own local experiences as well as the issues in a broader context. Roy raises her voice for the rejection of commoditization of needs and a commitment to a new ethics based on egalitarianism. Roy’s feminist vision offers a critique on patriarchy and its resultant concomitants – globalization and capitalism. It becomes imperative to consider particular cultural, regional, and geographical specificities within which the work of author is located. Though Arundhati Roy’s Keralite roots do provide a compulsive interplay of local as well as broader universal experiences in the novel, yet she stands out as a champion of all the marginalized classes and the novel is universal in its appeal.

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