



Life, Leaf and Water

in

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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The inevitable bond between man and nature has been a major theme in Indian literature from ancient times itself. Indian English literature is rich with works which can be read through the lens of ecocriticism. *Sankunthalam* by Kalidasa highlights the inseparable bonding between man and nature. Raja Rao's *Kanthpura* is a good example of the bonding between man and nature. He has shown how rivers and mountains play an important role in lives of the characters. R. K. Narayan used landscape as an important theme in his novels and the settings of his novel play an important role in the ups and downs of his characters.

It was Linda Hogan, an American Indian writer of the twentieth century who has demonstrated the interconnections between the human and natural worlds. She has reinforced the notion of the earth as a vital, living organism upon which we live and emphasizes on the preservation of earth's creatures and bridging the gap between the human and the non-human world. Jenine Benyus, scientist and author of the book *Biomimicry: Innovation Inspired by Nature* (1997) has emphasized upon sustainability of the environment as the main objective. Arundhati Roy has become a true follower of this eco tradition in her celebrated work *The God of Small Things*. The novel imparts the message that man and his environment are inevitably linked to one another.

Nature is not just a presence instead an active partaker of the proceedings of the novel. Arundhati Roy watchfully shows the link between the characters and the nonhuman world around them. Natural world is an all pervading presence all through the novel right from the beginning till the end. It is not merely a muted presence but a very active determinant which even decides the course of the story. All the human characters exhibit an inextricable link with the immediate non human natural world and even with the inanimate objects around them.

The God of Small Things has its immediate milieu in Ayemenem village near Kumarakom in Kerala. It is a cool and green hamlet nestled in the lap of the river Meenachal which plays a vital role in the novel. Roy weaves various incidents into one single chain thereby giving the readers a kaleidoscopic impression of events.

The plot line centers around a pair of dizygotic twins, Esthappen and Rahel. The flora and fauna of the locale plays a vital role in the course of the story. The novel opens with Rahel's return to Ayemenem after hearing that her twin brother Estha has come back. Rahel and Estha have not seen each other since Estha was sent away as a child to live with his father in Assam around twenty years back. Immediately the narrative shifts to the time when the twins were just seven years old. There was a coming back then also. They returned to the native home Ayemenem house with their mother Ammu who had married against the will of her parents. The rest of the family refused to accept them. Those who were there in the house were Ammu's mother (Mammachi), and her aunt (Baby Kochamma) and her brother Chacko and the patriarch of the family, Pappachi her father, who is a disgruntled, retired entomologist. After Pappachi's death, Mammachi starts a pickle factory called Paradise Pickles and Preserves which was later taken up by Chacko. Velutha is the handyman of the house who has the talent to fix anything in the house. The twins have an irresistible attraction towards him so does their mother Ammu which leads to the tragedy in their lives.

Although the novel is told by a third-person narrator, the events are seen largely through the eyes of Estha and Rahel. The novel traces the series of events in the fortnight in the seventies and its repercussions even in the nineties. The multiple narrative strains

are highly complex as it moves back and forth in time by juxtaposing past and present. This complexity gels seamlessly with the polyphonic thematic voices. It is a highly potent work which can be treated from various theoretical perspectives. This paper proposes to engage in an eco-aesthetic reading of the whole text.

The God of Small Things is as much about nature and landscape as it is about human lives. The sounds and smell of the zoo centric universe permeates the anthropocentric text. The locale appears as a living and inextricable character in the novel. Right at the beginning of the novel, we find a world where nature and culture have remained integrated long for years to perpetuate a stable, enduring and harmonious environment:

In the very opening itself Roy declares her ecological sensitivity when she celebrates the various forms of non human life. She sets the tone of the novel by deliberately suggesting the underlying the interlinking between the natural world and the human world.

The author adeptly conditions the reader for further clashes between the human world and the non human life forms when she describes the death of bluebottles against the window pane. This extrapolative narration anticipates the fatal clashes between the man and nature in the coming pages. In the beginning itself Roy gives us glimpses of the extremely lively natural world against the still, inactive human world- the Ayemenem House.

The constant moving back and forth between past and present helps the author to contrast the degradation and decline of the natural habitats of the non human life forms in and around Ayemenem. In the beginning when Rahel comes back it was raining heavily. Walking up to the house in the rain where she grew up, she remembers her imperceptible childhood. She and Estha, her dizygotic twin brother often crossed the physically, bodily separation between them by sharing each other's consciousness. Rahel's consciousness becomes fluid when she comes after twenty three years due to the particular environment of Ayemenem. The environment for Roy is the matrix that enables the collective and individual behavior of the characters.

Roy dexterously weaves into the narrative fabric the impact of globalization in the social and personal of life in Ayemenem. One major issue faced is that of sound pollution. The author is cautious enough in depicting how this noise affects the psyche of the characters. Estha by this time has shut himself off from then noisy world outside and has stopped even talking to others. The increase in noise levels is the new pollutant with the arrival of television and radio. Antenna disfigures the horizon and it transmitted waves which pollute the pristine air. Cable television net work has penetrated into every household taking people away from their immediate natural world.

Baby Kochamma after returning from America attends her garden like an autocrat exerting her power with authority and that was before the arrival of Television. Roy gives a vivid description of the change in attitude of the grand old lady towards her carefully kept garden after the inception of Television set. The addiction to television is portrayed through the character of Baby Kochamma who presided over the World in her drawing room .

She spends the entire day in front of the television set. Her reality has become a simulated one just like the soap opera. She became an addict of the virtual reality. The author very skillfully narrates the inroads of globalization into the serene greenish environment.

The television takes Baby Kochamma off from the nature around her. She stops caring for her garden which she had once tendered very fondly. As she withdraws herself from exerting her power over the biocentric world around her, it began to exert its power with a vengeance.

The power that is exerted by androcentric world on the natural world is the root cause all natural tragedies. For the egocentric man conquering land and natural resources is demonstrative of his power. It is the egocentric human psyche which makes him abuse the natural world around him. Chacko enlightens the twins with a historical perspective when he tells them the story of the earth. Chacko gives the twins a noble and humbling thought of mother Earth. He informs them that compared to Earth man is in his infancy and even then he is being detrimental to her very existence. Through the character of

Chacko, Roy expresses her ecocentric standpoint. Chacko adds by saying that, “And we, my dears, everything we are and ever will be- are just a twinkle in her eye’... (54).” The author tries to re-assert the ephemeral and transient nature of human life and the grand permanence of mother Earth. When humans foolishly try to exert their egoistic supremacy over the grand majesty of earth, it retaliates in a way which results in complete destruction of human civilization. Roy tries to convey this message through the acclaimed work.

The writer expresses the fear of Ammu regarding the future of her children by taking an example from the natural habitat.: "To Ammu her twins seemed like a pair of small bewildered frogs ...lolloping arm in arm down a highway full of hurtling traffic. Entirely oblivious of what trucks can do to frogs (43)".

The three houses described in the novel stands testimony to man-nature nexus- Ayemenem House, the History House, and the house of Velutha. All these houses though inanimate, but creations of human beings becomes instrumental in shaping the psyche of the twins as well other characters. The abandoned, lifeless Ayemenem House becomes the symbol of patriarchal as well as aristocratic hegemony. The house to which Rahel returns is a far cry of the aristocratic, flourishing Ayemenem house of the past. It is now an emptied shell of decay and a catacomb of the dead. The three people who still live there, Baby Kochamma, Kochu Maria and Estha, all are united in a moment of stagnation.

Standing at binary opposite is the small hut of Velutha which lacked all the embellishments associated with modern life. The children feel at home in the impoverished hut of Velutha. This laterite hut down the river is a near-perfect instance of eco-conscious living. It is constantly in touch with the natural environment. Hence it is in contrast to the grand design, money and suffocating atmosphere of a big house. It is an epitome of integration, inclusion and equity. It is next to the river and is hemmed in by an array of trees. Living in close communion with nature, Velutha exudes a certain kind of command that is unpalatable to a hypocritical world outside.

Through the eyes of young Rahel and Estha, Velutha appeared to be a special person because of his green knowledge, to shape their world in keeping with the natural environment. He has learned everything by constantly in close association with nature and also through his inherent brilliance. Velutha though living in harmony with nature, is conscious of his cultural parameters and is very certain of his work even in the mechanical age. He very confidently conveys those values to the twins also. The happiness and the comfort of the people who lived in close association with nature are depicted with vivid clarity by the author.

On her return after twenty three years Rahel finds that the History House is renovated and painted into a five star hotel called Heritage. The transformation that has happened to History house echoes the pollution of the cultural environment of the state. The indigenous culture and tradition is on sale. This is an aftermath of globalization which has set in nineties. The Kathakali dance performance in capsule form is an example of the culture sold in an abridged version. It is into this culturally and environmentally rotten state that Estha and Rahel returns after two decades.

All through the novel the writer projects an ecocentric world view. Arundhati Roy is a writer who has great concern for the women and environment. In the novel innumerable references and living descriptions of nature are found in a poetic language. The novel lays bare how our environment is being subjected to decay and destruction. The main female characters in the novel are Mamachi, Baby Kochamma, Ammu and Rahel. They had been the victims of the stipulations of the patriarchal society at one time or the other in their lives. Their ill-treatment by the world is paralleled with the exploitation of the natural environment. The river Meenachal is a perfect trope in the hands of the writer to portray a complete ecofeminist perception.

The river Meenachal plays a pivotal role in the novel evoking many images in the minds of the twins as well as other characters. It is a gift of God which flows through a broad landscape that has meadows, hills, swamps, and marshes. Meenachal river is the integral part of the life of the rural areas as it is the source of water in wells and for

vegetation on the banks. It supplies water to the urban centres in Kottayam District of Kerala.

Ayemenem house had a great view of the river from its veranda. Baby Kochamma insisted in shutting the view of the river from the Ayemenem house. The back veranda was closed with a sliding door. This gradually results in losing sound and smell of the house. Unlike others the twins spent most of their time in and around the river. The twins always considered the river to be their friend. The river was the shrine of comfort for the kids. It performed the role of an all comforting mother to the twins. The river remained a soothing presence for them. Ammu dreams of her lover emerging from the waters. She crosses the river to meet her lover Velutha. River here stands as the boundary which the society has imposed on women. Ammu dared to cross it though it eventually led to the tragedy in her life. She returns to the soothing lap of nature to forget the patriarchal oppression in her life.

It is this same bountiful, playful river which takes the life of Sophie Mol. This according to the author is a retaliation of the river against its ill-treatment by humans. When Rahel returned twenty three years later the whole image of the river had transformed. The old, abundant river greeted her, “with a ghastly skull’s smile, with holes where teeth had been and a limp hand raised from a hospital bed” (124).

There is a clear ecofeministic undertone when Roy compares Rahel and the river thus, “Both things happened. It had shrunk. And she had grown (124)”. The Meenachal River has changed drastically from the greygreen deep waters to a lean anemic one in the last twenty years. The river which had once enjoyed the freedom of running on its own is now regulated by the paddy-farmer lobby. They control the inflow of water from the backwaters so that they can have two harvests. The writer gives a pathetic picture of the river.

The unpredictable nature of the river evokes paradoxical responses, making it a potent trope of symbolic associations. There has been nauseating pictures of unabated pollution meted out to the river. There are encroachments on river banks due to excessive increase in population. Industrial effluents which are pushed directly into the river basin suffocate

its flora and fauna. The decaying of the river becomes symbolic of a society where meaning of values has been indiscernibly distorted.

The degradation of the river reverberates the tragic incidents in the life of the female characters in the novel. They were used and abused by the male-dominated society for their selfish needs just as they used the river. The river is not the only victim. Ayemenem itself has changed from its lush vegetation into a fragile façade of greenery. Ayemenem once known for its freshness, matchless greenery and rural quietness has changed when Rahel returns to it after two decades. Urbanization leaves the whole area lost of its greenish tranquillity.

The whole concept of return is a major thematic element. The return of the twins to Ayemenem after over a decade helps them to return to their childhood. Therefore it is both a psychological as well as a physiological return. Through the characters Roy exhorts for a return to nature which would help man to regain his lost innocence and childhood

Arundhati Roy judiciously juxtaposes the cultural and natural environment of the place Ayemenem in the seventies and that of the nineties. With skillful ingenuity she draws out clear pictures of the degeneration that has happened to both the natural world and the cultural world over two decades. She ardently appeals through the work for a drastic change in the attitude of the society towards environment. She points out that the human civilization is on the verge of fatal threat if the natural world is not preserved of its serenity. It is the imperfect harmony between man and nature that results in the ultimate doom of both. All these glimpses and many others scattered across Arundhati Roy's book present a very murky picture of ecological degradation brought about by human insensitivity towards other living beings and inanimate things. She exhorts for an ecologically viable egalitarian society through the celebrated work.

Works Cited

Roy, Arundhati. *The God of Small Things*. New Delhi: Penguin Books.1997.Print.