

Ecological Conscience in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract

*This paper analyses how the twin protagonists reflect their ecological conscience despite modern development in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) from an eco-critical perspective. Roy's narrative revolves around the frightening image of River Meenachal after the rapid development of the tourism industry in Kerala, India. The novel projects the interconnection of human beings, plants, and animals with River Meenachal. But the pollution into the lifeblood invites numerous hazards into nature. The encroachment toward the river occurs with modern materialistic development in India. Its immediate impact falls badly on plants, animals, and human beings. These issues in the novel invite a systematic exploration with the eco-critical insights proposed by Aldo Leopold and Paul W. Taylor. As a qualitative applied research, this paper draws on ideas from Leopold's concept of "Land Community" and Taylor's "Bio-centric Outlook". An ecological conscience is the only way to get out of the complexities caused by modern development. Harmony and integration with nature render the vibration of ecological sublimity to the protagonists. Their reflection secures the ecological future of Kerala, India, as well as other parts of the world*

Keywords: *Ecological conscience, ecological sublimity, harmony, integration, rupture*

Introduction

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* depicts rivers, lakes, natural canals, and estuaries in Kerala, India. The twin protagonists Rahel and Estha and their mother, Ammu, return to Ayemenem to release their family tension. River Meenachal flows at the heart of Kerala and it provides joy and happiness in the bygone days. Consequently, they memorize the sacredness of River Meenachal because the river gets polluted by human irresponsibility toward nature and the whole course goes out of control. The natural charisma suffers from the rapid development of the tourism industry in Kerala. Urbanization and the construction of a railroad change the pristine landscape. At the same time, toxic wastes are polluting the water of the River Meenachal turning it into a drain. These issues invite a systematic exploration of nature. Ursula K. Heise explains, ". . . ecocritics view the relation between modernity and nature" (508). The credit for exploring the relationship between modernity

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and nature goes to ecocritics. Modernity and nature cannot move ahead simultaneously. The intervention of modern development, thus, appears in the eyes of the twin protagonist.

Roy draws the attention of the national and international community ever since the publication of *The God of Small Things* in 1997. Miriam Nandi considers Roy “an icon of the global left” (175). Nandi presents Roy as the archetype of the third-world writer because she possesses the potential to raise subaltern concerns in South Asia. She speaks in favor of women, children, and margins in India. Elizabeth Outka initiates to explore the bundle of harrowing events in the novel. “The novel's most traumatized characters—the twins and their Ammu—reveal Roy's careful portrait of temporal hybridity and mixture of amnesia and flashback, frozen time and relentless return” (27). Outka reveals the traumatic events of the novel through the eyes of the protagonist in the form of amnesia and flashbacks. On the contrary, Jane Poyner finds the “. . . subaltern agency within the context of environmental change. . .” (55). Subalterns are the first sufferers of environmental degradation. We need to break it down for a prosperous future for humanity. The prosperity of humanity, certainly, depends upon the richness of our environment.

Roy's environmental concern takes the attention of critics from multiple perspectives. Aarthi Vadde explores the concept of “terrestrial cosmopolitanism” (529) in Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Roy's concept, hence, supports her broader outlook toward humanity because human beings' relationship with the land they live in is inseparable. Mutuality is the only way to make human life more beautiful. Mirja Lobnik explains, “Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* offers grounds for a sensory engagement in which the human body turns from a bounded and detached entity into one that is highly responsive to and intimately entwined with its environment” (116). Lobnik's reflection emphasized the importance of sensory involvement with the environment to enjoy a meaningful life. Vadde captures that Roy's novel “. . . address several spheres of existence—the biotic, the public, and the private— but also to develop formal strategies that enable readers to see these spheres as overlapping” (522-23). Roy, in the words of Vadde, demonstrates her ecological sensitivity in the novel. Ecological collectivity stimulates our understanding of the whole ecosystem. Similarly, Youngsuk Chae notices the “. . .interconnections between subordinated human beings and non-human nature. . .” (520). The affinity between human beings and non-human nature is undeniable. All these criticisms signify Roy's concern for environmental virtue.

This research study, therefore, argues that harmony and integration with nature is the gateway to ecological sublimity in the age of modernization. The twin protagonist, Rahel, and Estha reveal their ecological conscience despite the expansion of the tourism industry in Kerala and feel the vibration of ecological sublimity in such a horrific situation. They perceive the blissful pride of the river without coveting its domain. In this context, this study only focuses on the performance of the twin protagonist, reflecting their ecological conscience during the age of global tourism.

This study is based on the descriptive textual interpretation of Roy's *The God of Small Things* through the lens of ecocriticism. The researcher has used Aldo Leopold's concept of land community and Paul W. Taylor's bio-centric outlook on nature to analyze how the twin protagonist displays their ecological conscience. The ideas and opinions of other ecocritics have also been incorporated to strengthen the main thesis of the research.

Concept of Land Community and Bio-centric Outlook

Aldo Leopold begins the concept of land community in his land ethic in 1949. He proclaims, "The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, animals, or collectively: the land" (204). Leopold's impression of a land ethic is a philosophical insight that treats the soils, waters, plants, and animals as a member of the biotic community. Similarly, Paul W. Taylor also develops ways to show reverence for nature. Bio-centric outlook toward nature integrates the dignity of all living beings on the earth. Taylor argues that each living individual is a "teleological center of life," each being dependent on the sound biological functioning of others, and human beings should see themselves as equal members of the earth community (76). Taylor has a deep reverence for human and non-human life on earth. His philosophy is against human superiority in the world. In common, both concepts are highly eco-centric and they play a key role to imagine a utopia on earth. These concepts form the foundation of environmental ethics in the modern world.

Reverence to River Meenachal

Rahel and Estha, the twin protagonists of Roy's *The God of Small Things*, return to their maternal home in Ayemenem from Calcutta after twenty-three years. They observed significant changes envisioned by modern development in Kerala at this time. The twin protagonists display their ecological conscience when they see the sign of devastation at the heart of River Meenachal. They were saddened by the horrifying image of River Meenachal. Their reflection of ecological conscience appears as they witness the tragic fate of the sacred river after they arrive in Ayemenem.

Rahel and Estha return to Ayemenem in search of a maternal home. Estha, the brother, reflects his ecological consciousness when he observes the impact of the tourism industry in Kerala, India. His impression of expanding the tourism industry shows that human beings are destroying their integrity with the natural environment. But Taylor speaks in favor of the need to keep it intact. He writes, "Our duties to respect the integrity of natural ecosystems, to preserve endangered species, and to avoid environmental pollution stem from the fact that these are ways in which we can help make it possible for wild species populations to achieve and maintain a healthy existence in a natural state" (78). Human beings break their integrity with nature to fulfill their insatiable desire. They are not worried about the cozy homes of plants and animals on the earth. Estha notices the frightening scene while walking in the surrounding of Ayemenem. Roy portrays the fate of River Meenachal in this

way, “Now that he'd been re-Returned, Estha walked all over Ayemenem. 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” (13). Estha's deep ecological concern appears as a threat to human civilization. The smell of shit and pesticides, the death of fisheries, etc. along the banks of the river transcends our irresponsibility towards nature. Estha's reverence for the life of engendered fisheries in the river is a sign of his ecological conscience. To some extent, he is against the intervention of global capitalism in Kerala.

Again, Estha reveals his eco-consciousness when he could not feel the dampness of the rain while walking on the banks of River Meenachal. Human beings' eco-consciousness disappeared with the rise of the tourism industry, urbanization, and industrialization in Kerala. There is hardly any link between the people and the land. Leopold in his “Land Ethics” stresses that “biotic interactions between the people and the land” (205) have existed for ages. His focus on biotic interactions is necessary for the establishment of the reciprocal relationship between the people and the land. It gets disturbed during the time of transformation of society. Estha experiences the same thing after returning to Ayemenem because it is the developing period of the tourism industry in Kerala. “And Estha, walking on the riverbank, couldn't feel the wetness of the rain, or the sudden shudder of the cold puppy that had temporarily adopted him and squelched at his side” (Roy 15). Estha could not feel the wetness of the rain during the rupture of development in Kerala. He cannot identify the truth and beauty of nature. In other words, he is unable to have straight interaction with nature. Estha's helplessness to feel the dampness of the rain suggests how people are destroying their integrity with nature or the land community as a whole.

Rahel and Estha display their ecological conscience through the vibration of river sense. River sense is a technique that functions in the mind of the protagonist in the storyline. Roy's purpose in inventing river-sense in the narrative is to disclose the injustice upon River Meenachal after the development of the tourism industry in Kerala. The twins are distressed after the disappearance of natural backwaters in Kerala because it is a means of recollecting their childhood memory. Vadde opines, “Even after the developers destroy the backwaters, the ethics of its ecological collectivity persist in the afterlife of a river-sense narrative” (538). River sense, therefore, plays a significant role to protect the ecological magnificence of Kerala. Roy has become successful in her mission because Rahel and Estha undergo a similar experience as they observe encroachment on River Meenachal. She concludes, “Though you couldn't see the river from the house any more, like a seashell always has a sea-sense, the Ayemenem House still had a river-sense. A rushing, rolling, fish swimming sense” (30). Roy's intention to incorporate the concept of river sense in the narrative is to display her protagonist's ecological conscience. She does so when the twins imagine rushing, rolling, and swimming fisheries in the river. This is the result of polluting the river- a cozy home of plants, animals, and birds. Estha and Rahel demonstrate their bio-centric position by imagining the tragedy of aquatic animals in the River Meenachal.

River Meenachal appears as a powerful motif throughout the novel to raise environmental issues. Rahel and Estha show their deep reverence for the river even in the dream. We can call it their ecological concern since River Meenachal has transformed into a drain. The reverence for life that depends upon the river and the wish for a natural utopia shows their environmental ethics in the modern age. Taylor affirms the “attitude of respect for nature” (180). Reverence of nature, according to Taylor, is the essential element of environmental ethics. They cannot keep themselves away from the memory of the river during their stay at Hotel Sea Queen. “They dreamed the river. . . . With fish in it. With the sky and trees in it. And at night, the broken yellow moon in it” (Roy 122-23). The reminiscence of the river is enough to reveal the protagonist's integrity with the natural ecosystem. Their yearning to see the fish, trees, and moon in the river resembles the philosophy of Taylor. Surely, it is a reaction against human encroachment on the River Meenachal. Rahel and Estha find the river in them even in the dream and this is the stark ecological conscience of the protagonists that propagates out of their deep respect for River Meenachal.

Rahel explains the impact of global tourism in Kerala through the ghastly image of River Meenachal. She realizes that the natural function of the ecosystem has been damaged by the irresponsibility of human beings which leads the entire course astray. Anuradha Chaudhary argues that “humankind's fundamental irresponsibility towards nature” (168) is collective rationality. Chaudhary's concern is about the carelessness of human beings towards nature. She is afraid that we are destroying our ecological future by creating Frankenstein's monster. Roy threatens the world by depicting the image of River Meenachal through the eyes of Rahel. She writes:

Years later, when Rahel returned to the river, it greeted her with a ghastly skull's smile. . . . Despite the fact that it was June, and raining, the river was no more than a swollen drain now. Athin ribbon of thick water that lapped wearily at the mud banks on either side, sequinned with the occasional silverslant of a dead fish. . . . Bright plastic bags blew across its viscous, weedy surface like subtropical flying-flowers. (124)

Rahel's experience and evaluation of River Meenachal after the expansion of the tourism industry threatens the ecological future of Kerala. The overall pollution of River Meenachal shows our Frankensteinian attitude towards nature. We must protect the life of plants, animals, and other species in the river to feel the flora and fauna. We must realize that we exist because they exist. Rahel and Estha are pleading moral relation of universal brotherhood within the earth community.

Again, Rahel suffers from the reminiscence of River Meenachal because human beings are destroying the home of many plants and animals. Her affinity and integration with River Meenachal suffer from human beings' intrusion and encroachment. Taylor

asserts, “. . . we are relative newcomers, entering a home that has been the residence of others for hundreds of millions of years, a home that must now be shared by all of us together” (77). Taylor put forth the idea that it is wrong to covet the home of others either in the name of modernity or development. An act of intrusion into the earth leads us nowhere. That is why Rahel imagines in this way:

Inside the curtain, Rahel closed her eyes and thought of the green river, of the quiet deep-swimming fish, and the gossamer wings of the dragonflies (that could see behind them) in the sun. She thought of her luckiest fishing rod that Velutha had made for her. Yellow bamboo with a float that dipped every time a foolish fish enquired. She thought of Velutha and wished she was with him. (148)

Rahel memorizes the River Meenachal of the past because global tourism affects its ecological beauty. Aquatic animals disappear from the river due to pollution. In short, Rahel reveals her ecological sensitivity by memorizing the eco-friendly fishing rod made by Velutha. She wishes to secure a cozy home for plants, animals, and human beings despite the dominance of global capitalism. Her idea captures the true spirit of Leopold and Taylor's philosophical insights.

River Meenachal flows in the mind, body, and soul of the twin protagonists because it is an amazing creation of ecology. It appears frequently to rectify their immense love and respect for the river, plants and animals, and the whole community who depend on it. Divya Anand discovers the meaning of the River Meenachal in terms of segregation and connection. She argues, “The most powerful and pervasive natural entity that maps the changes at the metaphorical and literal plane is the Meenachal river whose ebb and flow mirrors the destinies of the characters both materially as well as symbolically” (101). Anand believes that River Meenachal serves different functions to the twins and their mother, Ammu. The same river connects the twins with Velutha, but it separates Ammu from Velutha. Rahel and Estha's reverence for the river is incomparable. “Two-egg twins looked out across the river. The Meenachal. Grey green. With fish in it. The sky and trees in it. And at night, the broken yellow moon in it” (Roy 203). River Meenachal is a powerful motif envisioned by Roy; it separates the rich people from the poor and connects the touchable with untouchable ones. Their undying love for fish, the river, trees, etc. projects their desire to feel ecological sublimity. In reality, they are creating the foundation of an egalitarian society on earth.

An egalitarian society becomes a mere dream in the absence of natural education. Rahel and Estha display their natural education which they get in the Ayemenem family. Natural education is the seed of a healthy ecosystem. Their ecological knowledge supports them to attain a blissful pride even at the time of global tourism. The realization of harmony and integrity among the members of the land community is ecological knowledge. Vadde argues, “As an alternative to Ayemenem's governing codes, the backwater's ecological

collectivity offers Rahel and Estha nonviolent and nonascendant forms of human knowledge ascertained through their environmental literacy” (534). Rahel and Estha's ecological knowledge explicates the interconnection between humans and the non-human world, especially in the case of the backwater. Likewise, their ability to read bending bamboo as a signal of the storm is another example of it. Roy describes Rahel and Estha's environmental literacy in this way:

The first third of the river was their friend. Before the Really Deep began. They knew the slippery stone steps (thirteen) before the slimy mud began. They knew the afternoon weed that flowed inwards from the backwaters of Komarakom. They knew the smaller fish. The flat, foolish pallathi, the silver paral, the wily, whiskered koori, the sometimes karimeen. (203)

Rahel and Estha's intimacy with the first third of the river is parallel to friendship. The interconnection between humans and the non-human world is unavoidable. Their sharp observation of the water level, stone steps, movement of weeds, fisheries, etc. proposes how much they respect the life of other creatures. It captures the essence of Leopold's land community and Taylor's philosophy of a bio-centric outlook on nature.

Conclusion: A Gateway to Ecological Sublimity

Ecological conscience is an indispensable element to maintain peace, harmony, and integration among all the living and non-living things on the earth. The harmony and integration among the members of the land community open the door to ecological sublimity. Ecological sublimity becomes urgent, especially at the time of rapid urbanization, expansion of global tourism, and industrialization. River Meenachal becomes the target of backwater developers. It is mostly affected by the toxic wastes of the tourism industry. Rahel and Estha compare the idyllic beauty of Kerala with the ghost of modernity. They show deep reverence for the river, fisheries, plants, and animals. Their wish to feel the river, see the fish in the water, and observe the reflection of the moon in the water is highly symbolic. It reflects their ecological conscience which in course of time renders access to ecological sublimity. Rahel and Estha's sublimation shimmers in the sacredness of River Meenachal. They have deep faith in harmony and integration between man and nature. They feel the echoes of the vibration even in the dream. Rahel and Estha perceive joy and happiness from River Meenachal without coveting it.

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