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UNVEILING THE WESTERN IDEOLOGY OF DEVELOPMENT IN
THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

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ABSTRACT

There has been an increased number of literary responses to the ecological crisis in the last two decades. Compelled by the idea of saving the environment a number of fiction writers portray environmental concerns as the fundamental aims of their literary texts. However, this study is invested in understanding how contemporary (non-Western/non European) fiction writers represent their environmental concerns in their fiction. This paper explores the role of environmental activism in *The God of Small Things* (1997) written by a South Asian novelist, Arundhati Roy. In this novel Roy examines issues of environmental degradation and condemns the western ideologies of development.

Key Words: environment, development, degradation, west

From prehistory, literature has been used for the representation of physical environment and human-environment relationship. Literature and environment studies—generally called “Ecocriticism” focuses on the environmental aspects of literature. The collaborative enquiry of literature and environment begins from the conviction that creative writing by virtue of its eloquence and expressiveness, narrative, and quality of images can convincingly help to discern the environmental complications prominent in the present-day world. Ecocriticism, therefore, “takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature.” (Glotfelty xix).

So the aim of ecocriticism is to blend literary theory with the environmental problems by focusing on the literary analyses of the portrayal of nature in the literary texts, and the literary constructions of the environmental crisis in eco-literary critiques. Today ecocriticism has also gained something in the exchange by including postcolonial texts into the mix from the regions which remained under the influence of British Imperialism and thus challenging what has been often noted as a kind of provincialism of ecocriticism.

Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, in their book *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* (2010) present major difficulty of defining both ecocriticism and post colonialism due to the wide range of ideas exhibited by the critics themselves in both fields (2). They argue that the best way to define this concept is to recognize that “the proper subject of post colonialism is colonialism, and to look accordingly for the colonial imperial underpinnings of environmental practices in both ‘colonizing’ and ‘colonized’ societies of the present and the past” (3).

Roy also brings to light the alternative knowledge system of her post-colonized people in *The God of Small Things*. She criticizes the imperialistic ideology of development, that is not in keeping with a larger world view that holds sacred the reciprocal responsibilities between humans and environment. Roy exposes how the

survival of plants, animals, and the land itself is at stake by neocolonial/capitalist developmental practices in her country.

Roy has been quite successful in turning the imaginative text into a spur for political and collective action to overcome the environmental crises not only in her specific culture but all over the world. In her novel she emphasizes that all developments of science, technology and commerce in the name of economic and technological uplift are mainly anthropocentric (human created) and definitely fail to take care of our natural environment. She calls attention to the disastrous effects of unchecked economic development to the respective environments in *The God of Small Things*. For her development is a disguised form of colonialism/neocolonialism serving the economic and political interests of the West.

It is significant to point out that the natural and the social environments of India have changed drastically in the last thirty to forty years due to the policies implemented by the Indian government to facilitate the entry of the largest multinational companies into the newly liberalized Indian market. The result of this liberalization is a sudden change in the indigenous environment, where the new, modern, industrial hubs have replaced the former small towns, and villages.

Thus, Roy sets *The God of Small Things* in a small village named Ayemenem in Kerala, an Indian state which is full of natural grandeur- trees, green fields and rivers. The narrative juxtaposes the postcolonial era of 1960s India with the globalized era of the 1990s. It is significant to mention that Roy herself spent her childhood days here in this village in close harmony with nature. As stated earlier, the state of Kerala is famous all over the world for its beautiful backwaters. There is an exquisite network of rivers, lakes, canals, and creeks making it the most alluring place to visit. In the very beginning of the novel Roy paints an enticing picture of Ayemenem. She writes:

“ 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 fence 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.” (Roy 1)

Kerala is well-known for the diversity of animal and plant species. Although fishing and agriculture have historically been the primary industries in Kerala, however, over the years tourism has grown as the primary source of economic growth over here. Roy has used this transformation of her native Kerala in her narrative to expose the massive environmental degradation brought in the name of agricultural and industrial development. Her work is a strong critique of barrage building, Kerala tourism industry and the transnational capital used in the completion of these developmental ventures.

Roy portrays the trauma of natural environment by juxtaposing the images of the river Meenachal in the past and the present. Formerly a small, quiet village, surrounded by a lush green jungle and the fascinating river Meenachal, in the 1990's Ayemenem has become a middle-sized town with fast growing industries, and both modern, well built houses for the wealthy people, and shanties for the Dalits.

The Meenachal of the 1960's was “Gay green”. With fish in it. The sky and the trees in it. And at night, the broken yellow moon in it. In the past it was known for its grandeur and splendor. It used to be a corner of solace for broken souls. “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 the Komarakom. They knew the smaller fish. The flat, foolish pallathi, the silver paral, the wily, whiskered koori, the sometimes karimeen” (163).

Whereas “years later, when Rahel returned to the river, it greeted her with a ghastly skull's smile, with holes where teeth had been, and a limp hand raised from a hospital bed” (98). The Meenachal in 1990's has been converted into “just a slow, sludging green ribbon lawn that ferried fetid garbage to the sea” (Roy 98). Roy by illustrating the poor and wretched condition of the river draws attention to the negative effects of dam building and industrial development on the environment. She terms it regrettable that the dazzling Meenachal has been weakened and exploited to move into the development phase, to multiply benefits and ensure so called improvement in living standards.

“Downriver, a saltwater barrage had been built, in exchange for votes from the influential paddy-farmer lobby. The barrage regulated the inflow of saltwater from the backwaters that opened into the Arabian Sea. So now they had two harvests a year instead of one. More rice for the price of a river” (Roy125).

These lines present Roy’s strong criticism of dam and barrage building in India. Infact shehas used her novel to express her great anger towards the irretrievable damage done to the indigenou environments during the completion of such projects. Although dams are considered as the most essential facility to the Indian people, in Roy’s perspective, such programs result not only in the inestimable destruction of the natural resources and environment but also in the barbarous shift of the local people from their homes and locales.

Roy argues that although mega dam projects were planned and launched with the avowed aim of not only improving the lives of the underprivileged masses but also to ensure overall empowerment of Indian people. However, it is very unfortunate that the results are not according to the expectations. On the contrary the development and well being accompanied by these schemes is absolutely deplorable.

She declares in her essay, “ The Greater Common Good,” that the interest in dam building infused a strong lease of energy in the policy-makers of India who took to the task with such immense ferocity that today India has 3,600 dams that qualify as Big Dams, 3,300 of them built after Independence. Six hundred and ninety five more are under construction. This means that forty per cent of all the Big Dams being built in the world are being built in India. Yet one-fifth of our population does not have safe drinking water and two-thirds lack basic sanitation.(56-57)

We find that in the novel, *The God of Small Things*, Roy shows her similar apprehension by objecting the imprudent policy of the government which has built a saltwater barrage down the river to get support in elections from the relatively strong community of paddy-farmers. It is true that people are now getting two harvests and more rice but they are getting them at the heavy cost. This has eventually killed the river. For the temporal benefit, the river has been sacrificed. “Once it 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.” (Roy 98).

The beautiful Meenachal river has lost its vitality. Due to the construction of barrage there is not sufficient water in the river. Even in the times of heavy rains there is not enough water required for the survival of fresh water fish, once used to be abundant in the river. Similarly the river water has been severely polluted by the waste materials discharged from the industries. Consequently most of the fish have died. Although it was the month of June, a time of inevitable rain, but the river was just a bulging drain.

The river which used to be the home of 80 different types of fish is no longer a safe heaven for its inhabitants. “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. Bronze-winged lily-trotters walked across it. Splay-footed,cautious” (Roy 98).

The construction of barrage has brought great ecological disasters. It has done irreparable damage to the environment of beautiful Ayemenem. The idea of progress involving theconstruction of mega dams has proved distressing as it brings enormous destruction with it. Roy claims that such “development and progress” do not come free. Building of dams has appeared to be suicidal as they lay the earth to waste. These colossal reserves of water clear away thousands of acres of land and leave the helpless people destitute and homeless. In the wake of such mega developmental schemes land, water, and forests are extensively damaged ,and eventually the poor Adivasis (indigenous tribal people) and the Dalits (Untouchables) have to pay the price.

While highlighting the damaging effects of salt water barrage Roy’s aim is to criticize the very idea of neocolonial development plans and the international players involved in the design of such projects. She proclaims that the international dam industry is always in search of new markets. As it does not have much to gain from the western world nowadays so its think tanks have found an alternative in the poor developing countries. It has been shifted to the new markets in the guise of development aid.

The international dam industry as Roy notes in "The Greater Common Good," is worth \$20 billion a year. If you follow the trails of Big Dams the world over, wherever you go - China, Japan, Thailand, Malaysia, Brazil, Guatemala-you'll rub against the same story, encounter the same actors: the iron triangle (dam-jargon for the nexus between politicians, bureaucrats and dam construction companies), the racketeers who call themselves International Environmental Consultants (who are usually directly employed by dam builders or their subsidiaries) and more often than not, the friendly neighborhood World Bank. (35, 36)

She argues that no doubt the dams provide electricity to urban Indians, supply water for irrigation to big farmers, increase the power of government servants, and bless the investors with mega contracts, however, they hit badly the indigenous populations by displacing them from their lumbering homes, and leading them to the doorsteps of acute poverty and misfortune. She repeatedly elaborates on her stance in her writings by referring to the unfortunate consequences of several dam projects in India.

The river Meenachal's desecration records not only the cost of living in an age of transnational corporate development but also speaks for the miseries of poor Dalits. Their lives in Ayemenem are as miserable as they had been for centuries. Even the "temples of modern India," do not bring any good news to them. They are rather trapped in spiraling poverty.

On the other side of the river, the steep mud banks changed abruptly into low mud walls of shanty hutments. Children hung their bottoms over the edge and defecated directly onto the squelchy, sucking mud of the exposed river bed. The smaller ones left their dribbling mustard streaks to find their own way down. [...] Eventually, 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. People bathed. [...] On warm days the smell of shit lifted off the river and hovered over Ayemenem like a hat. (Roy99)

In her criticism of multinational companies Roy also shows her dissatisfaction for the use of pesticides to increase the agricultural production as recommended by international agro-business corporations. The river Meenachal in the globalized era of 1990 is in complete devastation, "the river that is thick and toxic and 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 9).

Roy's criticism of international funding agencies and international agro-business corporations is quite evident in the above mentioned lines. The use of pesticides which are damaging for the environment has destroyed the aquatic life in the area. Roy blames these organizations for the consequences of the changes in the agricultural industry of India, and the repercussions they have had on the natural environment. She condemns the market-oriented logic, which forces the farmers to destroy their natural environment in order to have more harvests and eventually bringing disastrous consequences for the ecosystem of the Kerala backwaters.

Roy holds responsible the Western nations for nurturing their economies by trying to access new markets in poor developing countries. She condemns them for introducing their comparatively cheaper but low quality products in these countries and weakening the local products. She maintains that though this practice is carried out under the umbrella of economic cooperation and development but in actuality not only the real economic development suffers but also the pure environment is contaminated.

It is significant to point out that tourist development in the state of Kerala, which provides backdrop for Roy's novel, has been particularly the result of a specific interest group, the hotel industry, which gets benefits from subsidies, tax exemptions, and credit facilities at low interest rates (Sreekumar and Parayil 530). Using such concessions, the state government has designed different models of public-private partnerships with such star hotel conglomerates as the Taj, Oberoi, and Casino groups (Mathew), while successfully lobbying against the central government's Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) rules.

Although in the past fishing and agriculture have remained the primary industries in Kerala, however, over the years tourism has developed into the major source of economic growth. This is the reason that tourism has emerged as the top contributor to the destruction of Kerala's ecosystems. Promoted by the Kerala's Department of Tourism as "God's own country," the backwaters have been lauded by the National Geographic Traveler as one of the must-see places in India.

Though the state government drums the virtues of development but Roy is convinced that the cost that tourism incurs on the natural environment is much larger than the benefits it has for the economy. In the novel "History House" by the side of the Meenachal River is also bought by a five-star hotel chain and becomes a hotel famous as God's Own Country. It has attracted many tourists mostly foreigners who enjoy in the diversity of its ecosystem but it cannot be accessed by local people. The History House which was once a source of comfort for the people of Ayemenem is now a heaven for just the tourists coming from western countries.

Further inland, and still across, a five-star hotel chain had bought the Heart of Darkness. [...] 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 tall wall to screen off the slum and prevent it from encroaching on Kari Saipu's estate. There wasn't much they could do about smell. (Roy 159)

While mentioning History House as renamed God's Own Country Roy indirectly ridicules the Kerala government for naming the state as God's Own Country as its environment has been completely wasted by the fast developing tourism. "So they went ahead and plugged in the smelly paradise-'God's Own Country' they called it in their brochures" (Roy 99). So this is 'God's Own Country', Roy sarcastically refers to the way Kerala is advertised in the tourism sector by the State government, and in *The God of Small Things*, by the hotel administration "in their brochures" (Roy 99). It is God's Own Country, with an infected and awful environment sold to the tourists.

The hotel guests were ferried across the backwaters, straight from Cochin. They arrived by speedboat, opening up a V of foam on the water, leaving behind a rainbow film of gasoline. 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 tall 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. (Roy 159)

Roy exposes how the river gets toxic waste materials discharged from the speed boats and industries as well as by the children of poor Dalits raising their bodies over the bank and excreting directly onto the settled, sucking mud of the exposed river bed. Roy juxtaposes the rapid industrial development brought in the span of three decades with environmental degradation to expose the dark side of development. The poor Dalits are poorer than they had been before the advent of development era. They don't have even basic facilities of life. On the other hand the whole town is enveloped in stinking smell because of the filth, and toxic waste materials.

The analysis of *The God of Small Things* unearths the relationship between development and ecological degradation in Kerala. Development is depicted as a new form of old-style imperialism, which works through the collaboration between national government and transnational corporate companies, and whose financial and technical assistance is provided in terms that continue to favour the Western developed countries.

Roy explores how today the neocolonial system is centralizing power, wealth, knowledge and natural resources at the cost of local concerns of stability and survival. From the start of European Imperialism to date the superior western nations have not only exploited the resources and environments in indigenous societies but have also considered the people in these areas less than civilized. Whether it is colonialism or neocolonialism, what remains the same is who is being exploited and who is making the decisions and getting the profits.

Roy believes that these neo-imperial regimes interrupt the intricate web of mutual reliance between the human beings and the natural world in the developing countries. She contends that though the colonialism has ended, but the developed Western powers are not ready to keep their hands completely off their former colonies and colonized people. Hence they continue to exert their influence in these regions where their political and economic relationship is grounded in the development programs.

She suggests that for the sake of the survival of this planet a long-term vision and planning is required. Undermining traditional villains, like corrupt governments and international trade, while necessary, is not sufficient when confronting such issues. Shifts in national politics or public opinion may resolve the former, but the latter clearly requires a transnational, species oriented mode of thought. Ecological balance for Roy is hidden in the complete protection of biodiversity. She attends to the most basic principle of what

Timothy Morton terms “the ecological thought”: a belief that “everything is connected” (1). Her novel seeks to break the destructive connections between neocolonial development and the environment.

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