

Ecofeminist Concerns in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*

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Abstract

*Ecofeminism is a social, cultural, philosophical, political and environmental movement which focuses on the points of similarity between the systematic exploitation of women and nature within a patriarchal social structure. Ecofeminist studies seek to analyze the intricate links between women and nature in almost all spaces, ranging from religion, economic, political spheres to literary fields and cultural fields. This paper attempts an ecofeminist analysis of two novels by Indian women writers in English, namely Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) and Anita Desai's *Fire on The Mountain* (1977), with an aim to critically look for the patterns of interconnectedness between the repressive forces acting upon women and nature alike. The central dichotomies of nature vs. culture and man vs. woman, according to the dominant patriarchal capitalist ideology have been thoroughly highlighted.*

Keywords: ecofeminism, women, nature, oppression, patriarchy, etc.

Ecofeminism, also called ecological feminism refers to the branch of literary theory which blends feminist concerns with various issues of political ecology that politicizes the environmental matters. The term 'ecofeminism' was coined by the French feminist, Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* in 1974, suggesting the immense potential that women have in bringing about an ecological revolution. Ecofeminist theorists study and explore the connection between the human world and the natural world. More specifically, ecofeminism uses a feminist approach in the study of ecopolitics which seeks to put in place a democratic, classless society in which equality would be the norm. It actively talks about the similarities of oppression meted out towards women and nature, including the ways in which both nature and women are seen as commodities in possession of the males, placing men in the position of the custodians of culture and women as the conservators of nature, in turn exploring the various ways in which men suppress women and humans exploit nature. Thus, the main emphasis of ecofeminism is that both women and nature should be released from the

clutches of the oppressive forces acting upon them, and their autonomy should be duly respected.

Arundhati Roy is a highly acclaimed English writer of Indian origin, who won the Booker Prize for her novel *The God of Small Things* in the year 1997. Very boldly, she presents through her works the bitter facets of Indian society, highlighting the troubles of the downtrodden class, caste based discrimination, gendered biasness, corrupt police administration and cultural problems. This honest portrayal of social realities has often resulted in her landing amidst ocean of controversies. *The God of Small Things* is one such remarkable novel by Arundhati Roy which throws light on the naked realities of Indian society, hindering the path of social development and progress. The social evils which lead to the miserable lives of the suppressed downtrodden people have been projected in an attempt to make people aware of the wrongs meted out to these subaltern members of society. Roy is believed to have infused her novels with immense contemporary consciousness about India's culture, society, history, nature, and the ongoing environmental crisis. She an avowed feminist who has stood for anti-dam and anti-nuclear issues in favour of a cleaner, greener environment, and thus through her fictional work, tries her best to eco-feminize the exploitative hierarchy prevalent within the social structure, biased against women and nature, abusing nature in the name of progress and development, thus creating an interrelated network of exploitative relationships. In the novel, Roy aptly draws a strong parallel between the domination of women and the ecological damage in a patriarchal society. *The God of Small Things* opens with a rich description of the landscape and the summer season in the fictional village of Ayemenem, the place which forms the main setting of the novel:

May in Ayemenem is a hot, brooding month. The days are long and humid. The shrinks and black crows gorge on bright mangoes in still dust green trees. Red bananas ripen. Jackfruits burst. Dissolute bluebottles hum vacuously in the fruity air. Then they stun themselves against clear windowpanes and die, fatly baffled in the sun. (Roy 1-2)

The choice of a countryside as the location of the story serves the writer's purpose of depicting her ecological concerns in an extensive manner. There was a time when Ayemenem was an unpolluted place, with fresh water running through its river Meenachal, and the environment was overflowing with greenery and vigor in nature, which lost its charm with the gradual urbanization of the place. Thus metaphorically, the degradation of Ayemenem stands for the ultimate deterioration of the members of the Ipe family, who were weighed down by the clash between their personal likings and societal and familial obligations. Through the novel, Roy expresses her view that the silent suffering of women in male-dominated society can very well be equated with the endurance which nature is showing towards its reckless abuse since time immemorial. The concept of modernization has a very negative impact on nature, which is undoubtedly victimised because of the materialistic and insensitive tendencies of humans. As Jane Caputi herself states, "What is acted out on the

female body parallels the larger practices of domination, fragmentation, and conquest against the earth body, which is being polluted, strip-mined, deforested, and cut up into parcels of private property. Equally, this pattern points to the fragmentation of the psyche, which ultimately underlies and enables all of this damage.”

There are many instances in the novel, where we see the intricately intertwined relationship between women and nature. While teaching Rahel and Estha, Chacko “told them about the Earth Woman. He made them imagine that the earth- four thousand six hundred million years old- was a forty-six year old woman... it had taken the whole of Earth Woman's life for the earth to become what it was. For the oceans to part. For the mountains to rise. The Earth Woman was eleven years old, Chacko said, when the first single-celled organisms appeared. The first animals, creatures like worms and jelly-fish, appeared only when she was forty. She was over forty-five- just eight months about when dinosaurs roamed the earth” (Roy 54). The nature has been perceived as a mother figure in many cultures around the world. Karen J. Warren opines thus- “Prior to the seventeenth century, nature was conceived as an organic model, as a benevolent female, a nurturing mother; after the scientific revolution, nature was conceived on a mechanistic model as a (mere) machine, inert dead. On both models nature was female.”(9) This explains the inseparable relationship between women and nature.

In the words of Dido Dunlop:

Ecofeminism adds that patriarchy devalues women, and therefore devalues nature, because nature is seen as mother. Woman and nature get trashed together. Anything patriarchy associates with women is also trashed: caring, compassion, mothering, emotions, looking after nature, valuing life over money. To survive the climate emergency, we need to know we're part of Mother Nature. To value nature, we must honour women too, and vice versa.

History stands testimony to the fact that rivers have always played a major role in the establishment and development of the human civilization, capable of sustaining life, similar to the way in which women nurture lives. River Meenachal in the novel is seen as a preserver of life, in that it is a source of livelihood for the poor fishermen. However, this same river switches its role to that of a destroyer during the heavy rains, devouring lives. In the novel, the river has been associated with the character of Ammu, the mother of Estha and Rahel. Externally, she seems to be a calm woman, but internally she is seething with pain, on being unable to express herself and her inner desires. Upon listening to her favourite songs on the radio, “something stirred inside her. A liquid ache spread under her skin and she walked out of the world, like a witch to be a better happier place. On days like this, there was something restless and untamed about her. As though she had temporarily set aside her morality of motherhood and divorcehood”(Roy 44). This similarity can be traced even in the ways of Meenachal river, which something appears quiet as “a little church going ammu” (Roy 210), but in reality is a “wild thing”. Thus, we see that nature is used by Ammu as a refuge, in

order to escape from the bleakness and oppressive circumstances of her monotonous life. The river Meenachal serves as an agency of resistance for her as she spends hours sitting at its bank, seeking solace and comfort from nature.

Roy parallelly presents the miserable and wretched state of Ammu and the Meenachal river. Ammu has been depicted as living a life hurdled by societal pressures, and constantly yearning for happiness and pleasure. She is a victim of domestic violence at the hands of her parents. Her father, Pappachi thought that spending for higher education of a girl is “an unnecessary expense”. Her father was a reckless man, who used to beat her mother frantically, thus exposing his children to the unequal power hierarchy that exists in society between the two genders. Ammu's bitter experiences influenced her ways of thinking and acting, or as Roy describes lead to a “mullish, reckless streak that develops in Someone Small who has been bullied all their lives by Someone Big.” In Chapter 1, when Ammu goes to the police station, the Police Inspector Thomas Mathew's lecherous acts are enough to make anyone uncomfortable. “He stared at Ammu's breasts as he spoke. He said the police knew all they needed to know and that the Kottayam Police didn't take statements from veshyas or their illegitimate children...’ If I were you,’ he said, ’I'd go home quietly.’ Then he tapped her breasts with his baton. Gently. Tap,tap” (Roy 8). Here, Arundhati Roy, in her usual characteristic style, uncovers the way in which sex is used as a medium by males to assert their dominance on the weak and the vulnerable females. Thomas Mathew's humiliating behaviour towards Ammu deserves condemnation by the readers.

Surviving an extremely disturbed childhood and adolescence, Ammu seeks love and comfort in her marriage and motherhood, but fate has different plans for her; even her husband betrays her. In order to save his job, he asks his wife to satisfy the sexual desire of his boss. Unable to bear this humiliation, she returns back to her parents, only to be treated an unwanted person, and her emotions are thwarted by their indifferent attitude towards her. On the contrary, her divorcee brother, Chacko lives a life of luxury, adorned by the love and respect of the family members, despite his immoral activities.

Roy brilliantly delineates the double standards of the society through the text. Mammachi strongly believes that being the children of a divorce mother is a fate which is “far worse than Inbreeding.” On the contrary, Ammu's divorcee brother, Chacko is given all the love and respect that a human being deserves, despite sharing an equal status with her sister as one who is divorced. The hypocrisies of Mammachi are thoroughly laid bare when Ammu relationship with Velutha comes to the light. While Chacko's questionable indulgences with the women workers are deliberately left unnoticed by the women of the Ayemenem House, including Mammachi, being excused as “Man's Needs”, the latter strongly condemns Ammu as if she had committed a sin. Mammachi even ensures the easy passage for Chacko's female visitors, by building a separate entrance for them, and gives them money so that they look like prostitutes who come for satisfying the man's sexual hunger, rather than being his lovers. This very same woman stands against Ammu and holds

her responsible for denigrating their family reputation, and accuses her of having “defiled generations of breeding.”The novel portrays how patriarchal dualism allows the dominant oppressor the freedom to indulge in loveless acts of promiscuity, while the oppressed female the chance to love someone truly to be loved.

The Eurocentric patriarchal notion of ‘dualism’ organized the world by dividing it into binary pairs, which are in essence, opposed concepts- male being a separate concept from female and culture different from nature. According to this worldview, the destruction of nature and the subversion of women are necessary in order to turn the idea of the progress of the intellect into a reality. According to the Western patriarchal ideology, the socially and culturally built fear harbored by the dominant forces is that the primal power of nature and of the female have the potential to spread a sense of disorder and thus should be subjugated by the forces of the culturally dominant power, and the novel strongly bring out this idea to the fore. According to ecofeminists, the “other” includes not only women and nature, but animals, people of color’ “Third World” people, the lower class, as well in other words, all the marginalized inferior categories (Gruen 1993, p.80). The only male in the novel who suffered for going against the stringent norms of society is Velutha, who was victimized because he belonged to the downtrodden caste. The relationship between Ammu and Veluthais the igniting factor of all the disastrous troubles in their lives. No doubt, it is symbolic of a conjugation which stands in sharp defiance of all societal norms, resulting in a union of satisfaction and contentment:

Then for what seemed like an eternity but was really no more than five minutes she slept leaning against him, her back against his chest. Seven years of oblivion lifted off her and flew into the shadows on weighty, quaking winds... amid the murderous terror of being captured and destroyed forever, both Ammu and Velutha find momentary release from the life destroying realities, the deathly inevitabilities into a soul-elevating feeling of mutual support and protection in the dark night on the banks of the Meenachal.(Roy)

However, Ammu had to pay a very high price for this relationship of hers. She was locked up in a room and beaten badly, and later came to know that her love, Velutha succumbs to his injuries after being beaten up brutally by the police. In exercising her freedom of choice for a partner, and fulfilling her desire for a conjugal bliss, she violates the societal code of conduct imposed upon females since ages of domination and subordination, and thus was penalised for it. The fate of Meenachal River, crushed under the forces of modernization is similar to the fate of Ammu, who was ultimately broken down by the oppressive forces of patriarchy.

Roy's description of the barbaric ruthlessness with which the police treats Velutha in the History House is suggestive of raw, elemental fear, “feelings... of contempt born of inchoate, unacknowledged fear-civilization's fear nature, men's fear of women, power's fear of powerlessness.... Man's subliminal urge to destroy what he could neither subdue or deify”

(Roy 308). Thus, the relationship between Ammu and Velutha can well be equated with that of nature, which needs to be protected and conserved against its victimization by the capitalistic and materialistic tendencies of humans. “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 fitted garbage to the sea. Bright plastic bags blew across its viscous, weedy surface like subtropical flying- flowers” (Roy 118-119). The various development projects, recklessly taking place, supported by capitalistic patriarchy are responsible for the deterioration of the natural environment of Ayemenem. The flourishing of the tourism industry too took a heavy toll on nature, stripping it off its natural beauty. The History House was converted into a lavish hotel for commercial profit, in order to accommodate the heavy flow of tourists. As Roy writes, the river Meenachal, which was once “Grey green with fish in it. The sky and trees in it. And at night, the broken moon in it.” now “smelled of shit, and pesticides bought with World Bank loans. Most of the fish died. The ones that survived suffered from fin-rot and had broken out in boils.” The writer’s disappointment with the unethical taming of nature by humans, and also the victimization of the ecological beings in the name of rapid modernization and scientific advancements, leading to the destruction of the natural order is evident here.

Anita Desai’s novel *The Fire on The Mountain* won the Sahitya Academy Award in 1978. The novel presents the dark aspects of nature as a phenomena interlinked with the dark and dismal sides of the women characters, by putting them on a parallel level in context of their oppression and subjugation. Desai’s novels often revolve around issues of social significance including the feminine revolts against male domination and the phallogocentric setup of society, which seeks to impose its ideologies upon the marginalized. She uses a highly symbolic title for her novel, which is indicative of not only an actual incident taking place on top of the mountain but also suggests the unfathomed burning rage and passion within the restless souls of women, continuously striving to assert their agencies. The novel concerns itself with three women, namely Nanda Kaul, Raka and Ila Das and shows how their destinies are intertwined with nature in their systematic oppression. The three women characters are ensnared within the patterns of dualistic patriarchy according to which man symbolizes power, pride, ruthlessness, hatred, victimizing women and nature at all stages of life. B.R. Nagpal rightly remarks that- “The women protagonists are portrayed as victims of an aberrant urban milieu, patriarchal family structures and bourgeoisie, bureaucratic, imperialistic, colonized, social scenario. It is in this context that the characters are in a state of revolt, despondency, morbidity and are driven to grapple with duality, fragmentation” (59).

Nanda Kaul around whom the course of action of the novel revolves is an old woman, living secluded in a Himalayan town Kasauli, far away from the world and the place where she was always known to be a dutiful wife and mother “out of vengeance for a long life of duty and obligation” (Desai 30). She holds the social mores responsible for imposing upon her the duty of motherhood, without leaving any other choice in front of her, resulting in her

submission to the conventions. Now, she finds “the children alien to her nature” (Desai 30) and thus prefers to withdraw herself from the duties of caring and nurturing children. In the conventional Indian society, women are conferred a lower position than that of men, thus silencing them forever. All the institutions of society, be it education, marriage or religion, serve as instruments to suppress feminine voices and needs. Thus, it can be said that woman’s position in the “Third World” is somewhat between patriarchy and imperialism. By severing all ties from the external world, Nanda seeks to heal the deep wounds of her soul, which are the products of her husband’s betrayal. “The old house, the full old house of that period of her life when she was the vice-chancellor’s wife was the hub of a small but intense world, which had not pleased her. Its crowding had stifled her.... They had so many children, they had gone to so many schools at different times of the day, and had so many tutors.... all of different ages and families” (Desai 29-30). On a superficial level, everything seemed quite pleasant, but internally Nanda was burning with fury and rage.

Raka is the great-granddaughter of Nanda Kaul whose mother, Tara is a victim of severe nervous breakdown stemming out of her marital discord and dissatisfaction. As a small child, Raka suffers the indifference of her parents, which greatly affects her personality development, later in life. After she recovers from typhoid, she is sent to Carignano to enjoy herself and completely regain her former health. However, she is a girl who loves to remain aloof from the outer world, and thus makes up her mind to visit her great-grandmother Nanda, in search of isolation. “If Nanda Kaul was a recluse out of a vengeance for a long life of duty and obligation, her great granddaughter was a recluse by nature, by instinct: she does not arrive at this condition by a long route of dejection and sacrifice, she was born to it simply” (Desai 48).

She fills the gap in her life by bonding with nature, and shedding of all her insecurities momentarily. She is driven towards Kasauli by the sheer force of her love for destroyed and ruined places. She finds peace and relief in the company of nature, which is the perfect place for her to escape from her dull and dreary life. The savage, barren landscape of Kasauli metaphorically reflects Raka’s disturbed mental and emotional state during her childhood years. The pine, which was burnt during the forest fire attracts Raka much more than the fresh leaves of the pine tree shining brightly in the sun. She finds an instant association with the charred tree, which can be compared to the charred wounds of her heart. As Rogobete states, her liking for the decay and damaged “is translated in her frequent association with fire metaphors- symbols of inner trauma, desperate quest for self-assertion and independence” (97).

The third woman character of the novel, Ila Das is Nanda’s friend, who actively fights for women’s rights and depends upon Nanda for mental support. Rogobete remarks that “Nanda and Ila share the same vulnerability, hidden under the deceiving appearances of aloof isolation, or courageous social engagement” (95). Nanda struggles throughout her life in order to establish an identity of her own in society and with this aim, starts working as a

welfare officer. She tries to make people understand the evils of child marriage, but her efforts are fruitless in a patriarchal setup. “It’s so much harder to teach a man anything, Nanda- the women are willing poor dears, to try and change their dreadful lives by an effort, but do you think their men will let them? Noooo, not one bit” (Desai 129). At the end, however, Ila pays a high price for transgressing the defined boundaries of a woman in a traditional society. She is raped and murdered when she tries to stop Preet Singh, a villager from getting his seven year old daughter married to a widower with six children, in exchange of an acre of land and two goats. She is “crushed back, crushed down into the earth, she lay raped, broken, still and finished” (Desai 143). Ila’s fate is suggestive of the broader picture- of the fate of women as a whole, who are destined to succumb to the sexual appetite of men, and ultimately death, if they try to break the established norms.

The male capitalist tendencies include the use of forest fires for cultivating land, which leads to the deterioration of the natural sources, and also the ecosystem of the Kasauli Hills, in which the poor people emerge as the ultimate victims. In the novel, we see the poor people greatly affected by fire. In a massive forest fire, the house of a poor old woman was destroyed and “she went mad and was put away” (Desai 57). A vast area of Kasauli was chosen for setting up an army camp, pointing to the insensitive attitude of man towards nature. The tampering of the natural landscape of Kasauli for commercial profit can be equated with the discrimination against women in the novel. A parallel can be drawn between the Ila Das’ rape and murder and the devastation of Kasauli’s natural environment in order to ensure the flourishing of the tourism industry, and the army camp.

C.G. Shyamala (2011) states that “Desai has the power to express sensibilities in her canvas using images from nature....She is an artist who has the ability to carve such deep emotions within dexterous use of imagery that they announce the introduction of the explorations of the selves within the ecological framework’ (7). Desai’s *Fire on The Mountain* is replete with natural imagery, with multi-layered connotations. The symbolism of plant and animals are used to depict the psyche, personalities and actions of the characters. The bleak and gloomy landscape of Kasauli is symbolic of the bleakness and gloominess of Nanda’s inner psyche. The fact that Nanda could identify herself with the pine trees indicates “her desire for absolute stillness and withdrawal from life” (Indira 4). Nanda’s unwelcoming attitude towards Raka in Kasauli has been described by Desai using the image of “the yellow rose creeper” which “had blossomed so youthfully last month but was now reduced to an exhausted mass of grey creaks and groans again” (Desai 17), showing how her hopes of living a life in solitude were shattered.

The novel abounds in significant images of birds, animals and insects to suggest the inner psychological state of Nanda. She seems to be trapped between the eagle’s aloofness and detachment. “She had wished’ it occurred to her, to imitate that eagle- gilding with eyes closed” (Desai 19). Nanda believes that Raka “looked like one of those dark crickets that leap up in fright but do not sing, or a mosquito, minute and fine, on thin precarious legs” (Desai

39). Nanda's thoughts about her liberation from the societal bondage has been described using images from nature; she hears "A burst of crackling and hissing, as of suddenly awakened geese, a brief silence, then a voice issued from it that made her gasp and shiver" (Desai 21) She has been likened to a bird whose privacy and harmony has been intruded upon as Raka arrives.

The most powerful natural imagery employed in the narrative is that of the fire. On seeing the forest fire with Nanda Kaul, Raka is initially excited and fascinated by it. At the end of the novel, Raka actually sets fire. R.S. Shamara (1981) opines that the fire is "expressive of Raka's resolve to destroy a world where a woman cannot hope to be happy without being unnatural" (145) the title of the novel is quite ironical, since mountains are known to be "usually havens, calm places, associated with holiness and divinity" (Singh 110). However, humans are responsible for disturbing the calmness and holiness of nature, thus inviting trouble for themselves. The mountain may be perceived as symbolizing Nanda Kaul, the fire can be identified with the unrestrained ways of Raka. Ila's rape and murder in the darkness of the forest may be taken as a sign of the power of men as a controlling agency, exercising domination over both women and nature.

Arundhati Roy and Anita Desai succeed in capturing the essential links between the oppression of women and that of the ecological environment. An ecofeminist analysis of the texts make it possible for people to understand the structural and ideological grounds which believes in suppressing women and exploiting nature in order to perpetrate their control and dominance in society, and emerge as the ultimate power-holders. Both the novels *The God of Small Things* and *Fire on the Mountain* brilliantly present the interconnectedness between nature and human beings, especially women, by bringing to the fore the unequal power mechanisms that operate within a society based on patriarchal dualistic philosophy, and an unjust economic logic which has been rationalized in a bid to legitimize the environmental abuse and also the marginalized sections.

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