

DETERIORATING NATURE AND WOMEN: AN ECOFEMINIST READING OF ARUNDHATI ROY'S *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*

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ABSTRACT

Ecofeminism is the term which explains a strong parallel connection that exists between the oppression of women and the domination of nature by patriarchal society. The paper analyses the deterioration of nature and women in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. The village of Ayemenem with its characters and natural atmosphere undergo the process of demolition. Arundhati Roy as an Indian novelist shows the plight of women and nature in India. The abundant nature slowly corrupts along with the downfall of the Ipe family. As a feminist, she not only explains the subjugation of women characters in the patriarchal society but also brings out her concern for the environment. The correlation of ecological abuse and gender discrimination is explored through ecofeminism. The novel highlights the social concern of environmental destruction and feminist perspective of oppression of women.

KEYWORDS: Ecofeminism, Environment, Women, Deterioration

INTRODUCTION

Ecofeminism is the term which explains a strong parallel connection that exists between the oppression of women and the domination of nature by patriarchal society. The oppression of women and nature is coupled in Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things*. Suzanna Arundhati Roy is an Indian women novelist and activist known for her environmental concerns. This Man Booker fiction portrays subjugation of women under the authority of male dominated society. The novelist strikes about similar suppression of natural environmental surroundings. This paper presents the deterioration of the Ipe family women with that of nature driving the point of ecological abuse and gender discrimination.

Ecofeminism is a political, cultural and intellectual movement which developed in the late 1970's and 1980's in the activist and academic field. The term ecofeminism was first coined by the French feminist Fracois d'Eaubonne in her book *Le Feminisme ou la Mort* [Feminism or Death] published in 1974. Ynestra Knight calls it the third wave of feminism. Karen Warren denotes that ecofeminism is an umbrella term for a wide range of approaches and the ecofeminist are classified with varied names such as socialist ecofeminist, cultural ecofeminist, radical ecofeminist, ecowomanist etc. She justifies that nature is essentially feminine in outlook through the following lines:

Ecological feminism ("ecofeminist") claim that there are important connections between the unjustified domination of women, people of color, children, and the poor and the unjustified domination of nature. Throughout this book, I refer to unjustifiably dominated groups as "Others," both "human Others" (such as women, people of color, children, and the poor) and "earth Others" (such as animals, forest, the land). The reference to "Others" is intended to highlight the status of those subordinate groups in unjustifiable relationships and systems of domination and subordination. According to ecofeminists, "nature" (referring to nonhuman

animals, plant, and ecosystems) is included among those Others who/that have been unjustifiably exploited and dominated. “Nature is a feminist issue” might well be called the slogan of ecofeminism. (Warren 1)

The novel *God of Small Things* begins with the description of weather in Ayemenem and return of Rahel back to her home. “May in Ayemenem is a hot, brooding month. The days are long and humid. The river shrinks and black crows gorge on bright mangoes in still, dustgreen trees” (Roy 1). The novelist Arundhati Roy presents natural surroundings as an integral part of Ayemenem, the fictitious village situated in Kerala which unfolds the events of Ipe family. The progress of the village deprives natural surroundings.

Estha, the elder of the twins returns to Ayemenem and turned into quiet man who only walked along the banks of the river Meenachal. Roy presents the rotting of the river with the development of the village in the wake of industrialization. The silence of Estha equating with the decaying nature of the fishes states the deterioration of human along with nature. “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” (Roy 7). Rahel is able to see the presence of green environment in the photograph of her great grandparents Reverend Ipe and Aleyooty Ammachi. The lost glory of Ayemenem is presented in the following lines:

Through the holes in her ears you could see the hot river and the dark trees that bent into it. And the fishermen in their boats. And the fish. Though you couldn’t see the river from the house anymore, like a seashell always has a sea-sense, the Ayemenem House still had a river-sense. A rushing, rolling, fishswimming sense. (Roy 15)

Donna Haraway one of the ecofeminists opines that certain kind of dualism is present in the Western tradition in which the oppression of “Others” (women, nature, children) has been persistent.

The point being made about these dualism (‘man/woman’, ‘culture/nature’, etc) is that the first term of each pair has often been defined in opposition to and with implicit superiority over the other. Environmental critics refer often to such hierarchial dualisms, though there are various different ways of engaging them. (quoted in Clark 111)

Estha and Rahel’s grandmother, Mammachi is always ill treated by her husband Pappachi. She is often beaten by him even in her old age. “Every night he beat her with a brass flower vase. The beatings weren’t new. What was new was only the frequency with which they took place” (Roy 23). Pappachi, an educated Entomologist envied his wife for she started her own pickle factory and so he oppressed her physically by beating. Ammu, their daughter did not have education like their son, Chacko. Pappachi stopped Ammu’s education and waited to get her married. “Ammu finished her schooling the same year that her father retired from his job in Delhi and moved to Ayemenem. Pappachi insisted that a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl, so Ammu had no choice but to leave Delhi and move with them”(Roy 19). Both mother and daughter became victims to the patriarchal society. Pappachi dominated his wife and daughter and hindered their socio-economic progress. Equality between men and women is essential for the well being of the both genders. According to World Bank (2002),

Gender is an issue of development effectiveness, not just a matter of political correctness or kindness to women. Evidence demonstrates that when women and men are relatively equal, economies tend to grow faster, the poor move more quickly out of poverty and the well being of men, women and children is enhanced. (quoted in Buckingham 149)

Ammu divorces her husband and returns back with her twins to her home. Chacko treats her indifferent and does not want to share the family property with her. Mammachi inspite of her own economic progress, she is not respected by her husband. The patriarchal society in Ayemenem is over domineering and hinders the economic independence of the women. Gender equality is important for the development of the society. But in the novel the matriarchy is controlled and deprived of its progress. The deteriorating condition of the women can be linked with the destruction of the natural milieu.

The nature in Ayemenem turns out to be polluted and tainted over years. The twins in their childhood played in the river which was fresh and pure. "It was warm, the water. Graygreen. Like rippled silk. With fish in it. With the sky and trees in it. And at night, the broken yellow moon in it" (Roy 59). Rahel after twenty years returning to the village finds out that the Meenachal river to be in the worst condition.

It greeted her with a ghastly skull's smile, with holes where teeth had been, and a limp hand raised from a hospital bed.... Despite the fact that it was June, and raining, the river was no more than a swollen drain now. 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 underwater. Bronze-winged lily-trotters walked across it. Splay-footed, cautious. (Roy 59)

Ecofeminism states that conferring power on patriarchy paves way for their higher status in the society. The society influenced under the control of masculinity leads to the hierarchical dualism that thrashes the feminine attributes. In the novel, Ammu is disrespected by the family members after her divorce whereas Chacko, the son is respected even after his divorce. Divorced from his English wife Margaret, Chacko comes back to Ayemenem and helps his mother to run her pickle factory. The position of a woman is reduced if she is not living together with her husband and her social status is undermined. "Baby Kochamma disliked the twins, for she considered them doomed, fatherless wail...Baby Kochamma resented Ammu, because she saw her quarreling with a fate that she, Baby Kochamma herself, felt she had graciously accepted. The fate of the wretched Man-less woman" (Roy 22). According to Gaard, the female status must be improved by the reduction of power of the male-dominated society.

The personal is political, and hence the female private sphere is just as important and applicable to the male public sphere. One needs to change the patriarchal nature of the system by withdrawing power and energy from patriarchy. (quoted in Rao 126)

Vandana Shiva is a well known ecofeminist who believes that women are custodians of the feminine principle and they have special connection to the nature. Industrial culture has separated these connections and she wants it to be recovered.

'Development' could not but entail destruction for women, nature and subjugated cultures, which is why, throughout the Third World, women, peasants and tribals are struggling for liberation from 'development' just as they earlier struggled for liberation from colonisation. (Shiva 20)

Development in the economic stance has lead to the demolition of the nature and the environment. In the novel, Ayemenem house which is "grand old house" is now in a pathetic condition losing its importance owing to the social development of its inhabitants. "Filth had laid siege to the Ayemenem House like a medieval army advancing on an enemy castle. It clotted every crevice and clung to the windowpanes" (Roy 42). The village which was unique with natural surroundings now has become urbanized with numerous roads and houses constructed. "In truth, its population had swelled

to the size of a little town. Behind the fragile façade of greenery lived a press of people who could gather at a moment's notice" (Roy 61).

Another important change which indicated the decline of the village's legacy is the conversion of Kari Saipu's house into hotel. The house known to the twins as

"The History House. With cool stone floors and dim walls and billowing ship-shaped shadows" (Roy 25). The social progress has pressed for changing the house into tourist destination.

The History House (where map-breath'd ancestors with tough toe-nails once whispered) could no longer be approached from the river. It had turned its back on Ayemenem. 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. (Roy 61)

One of the notions of the Western culture in which women and nature connections are explained is through the organic conception of nature and gender. The conception of earth is seen as a nurturing mother. Arundhati Roy also envisions the concept of earth as a woman and she is all potent that huge achievements of human beings tend to be nothing more than the blink of her eye.

Chacko said that the whole of contemporary history the World Wars, the War of Dreams, the Man on the Moon, science, literature, philosophy, the pursuit of knowledge-was no more than a blink of the Earth Woman's. (Roy 26)

The novel *God of Small Things* provides the history of the Ipe family of Ayemenem where the decline of their members particularly women draw parallel with the demolition of the abundant nature of the village. The peaceful coexistence of men and women are needed for the welfare of the society. According to Searger,

The identity and destiny of women and nature are merged. Accordingly, feminist values and principles directed towards ending the oppression of women are inextricably linked to ecological values and principles directed towards ending the oppression of nature. It is ultimately the affirmation of our kinship with nature, of our common life with her, which will prove the source of our mutual well-being. (Seager 22)

The hierarchical dualism need to be abandoned for the wellbeing of the nature and the women. Life is interconnected and change in the value system is required for a perfect harmony in the world. The paper provides the social concern of the author about environmental destruction and feminist perspective of oppression of women.

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