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Geographical Ecocriticism: A Critical Study of The God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy

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Abstract

This research explores the root causes of the climate crisis in South Asia, particularly in the subcontinent. It examines The God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy through the lens of ecocriticism, as proposed by Glotfelty. Ecocriticism studies the relationship between humans and nature, critically analyzing environmental depictions in literary texts to raise awareness about ecological degradation. This qualitative study employs textual analysis to investigate how the novel reflects the destruction of South Asia's climate due to environmentally harmful practices. The research identifies the depletion of natural resources as a central concern, demonstrating how their exploitation has led to a severe ecological crisis in the region. Furthermore, it establishes that The God of Small Things illustrates ecoviolence as an ongoing process. The findings reveal that colonial exploitation of South Asia's natural resources significantly contributed to environmental degradation, benefiting the colonizers while leaving everlasting consequences for the region. This study enhances the understanding of ecological disruption in South Asia, particularly in the subcontinent, and emphasizes the urgent need to address these environmental challenges.

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1) Introduction

1.1 Background of the study

Geographical ecocriticism involves analyzing how a literary work engages with geographic spaces, landscapes, and environmental concerns, highlighting the relationships between humans and their environments. In *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, geographical ecocriticism can be explored through the depiction of Kerala's landscape and its intersection with the lives of the characters. This research explores the novel's rich descriptions of the natural environment, which play a crucial role in shaping the narrative and reflecting broader social and political issues. Ecocriticism, a relatively new field of literary theory, has deepened our understanding of the relationship between literature and the environment. This literary theory deals with the nature of literature and the role of humans in the shaping of their civilization, cultural practices, economy, politics, and living habitats. Initially, this theory originated as an idea named literal ecology.

As the world goes through a period of globalization, ecocriticism remains relevant and continues to draw attention to the function of literature in raising awareness of ecological issues and encouraging people to embrace responsible stewardship of the environment. Glotfelty (1996) provides the most well-known definition of ecocriticism:

The study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes a nature-centred approach to literary Studies (p. xviii).

1.2 Author's Introduction

Suzanna Arundhati Roy was born on 24th November 1961 in Shillong, Meghalaya, India. She is an author of many books and an activist. More to do with her writing, Roy is most famous for her T.S.

1.6 Rationale of the Study

There has been no research found on the application of the theory of ecocriticism by Glotfelty on the natural environment portrayed in the postcolonial era, illustrated in the TGST. The

Eliot-awarded novel, *The God of Small Things*.

Her mother, a Christian of Syrian culture, had to battle India's inheritance laws to ensure that Christian women had the right to a fair share of their fathers' estates. Roy's father was a tea planter of Bengal origin. Roy had an architectural background, but he did not have any liking for design at all. She is also an activist. Other than *The God of Small Things* (1997), Roy wrote other fictional and non-fictional works as well, which are; *The Ministry Of Utmost Happiness* (2017) fiction, *The End of Imagination* (1998), *The Cost of living* (1999) nonfiction, *The Greater Common Good* (1999), *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* (2002), *Power Politics* (2002) nonfiction, *War Talk* (2003) nonfiction, *Capitalism: A Ghost Story: A Novel* by Bill Bryson (2014). She also acted as a costar in the movie *In Which Annie Gives It to Those Ones* (1989) and has also written the movie *Electric Moon* (1992) and many other films and dramas.

1.3 Problem Statement

This research problematizes that the environment-disrupting practices and natural land forms that are present in Roy's TGST create an atmosphere where the cause of environmental emergency will be studied. These elements, as presented in the story, are not only the vestiges of colonialism that have persisted into the present day but are also active threats to the environment, which have tremendous consequences for the entire world, not just South Asia.

1.4 Research Objectives

The objectives of this research are:

1. To find the ecological factors that are prominent in the novel's text, whose abuse has led the people of South Asia to go into ecological crisis.
2. To explore how the manipulation of the natural resources has led to the present-day climate emergency.

1.5 Research Questions

1. How are the ecological and environmental concerns reflected in the novel?
2. How has Roy depicted that ecoviolence is an ongoing process?

genesis of this research is the realization that the condition of the natural environment is gradually worsening in the world. The environmental issues

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Faced by the world, including severe climate change impacts, deforestation, water pollution, and over-exploitation of natural resources, Effect. Among the reasons that drive this To the increasingly worsening climate situation.

1.7 Delimitation of the study

This research has been delimited to the findings of the research through the application of ecocriticism by Glotfelty on the novel's text. This study will include only the text and the factors highlighted in the text to correlate with the findings of the research and to compare them with the adverse conditions of the environment in Pakistan.

1.8 Significance of the Study

This study will help create an environment where texts such as *The God of Small Things* and many other types of literature by different authors may be analyzed and examined, and explored to find the root cause of the present climate crisis, in the environmental context, as a voice of the people of that region. As this study aims to examine the portrayal of environmental pollution and ecological imperialism in the novel, it will go a long way in helping to address the environmental issues highlighted in the novel by providing insights into more effective environmental management and environmental policy-making.

2) Literature Review

Ecocriticism, previously known as green theory may seem like a relatively new literary theory for the postmodern age critics except, Mishra (2017) writes that it dates back to the origin of romanticism in the late eighteenth century in the UK when Wordsworth and Coleridge first published their *Lyrical ballads* (1798) and the reason for this movement to emerge was to shift the focus the growing materialistic approach of people towards nature and earth, putting it parallel with the new academic discipline known as ecocriticism (pp. 435-37).

Ganaie's work (2018) explained that it is

In the review article, Schröttner (2009) establishes that the environmental aspect is portrayed in the way the political events affect the physical environment in the newly formed India (pp. 285-98). Regarding the analysis of postcolonial natural environments from an ecocritical perspective, Ismailinejad (2015) notes that the exotic Caribbean background is a significant aspect

requires a concentrated academic analysis of cause and

Research is needed to draw attention

William Rueckert who is credited with the naming of the term ecocriticism (p. 5). The two most important publications during this period include the edited collection of Glotfelty and Fromm (1996) and the appearance of Buell's *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Ecocriticism appeared in the form of waves. Many scholars, for instance, Glotfelty (1996) and Buell (2005) have written about them. Gerard (2002) asserts that this is probably where ecocriticism got its name as an avowedly political form of analysis. Unlike the previous wave, this one preserved the cultural dualism between man and nature and, at the same time, stressed the value of nature. The second wave is particularly postmodern in that it problematizes some of the most foundational binary oppositions between the human and the non-human (pp. 3-5).

Fenn (2015) posits that many scholars have participated in the creation and formulation of ecocriticism, and the following names and works are only several of the most notable ones (p. 116). Glotfelty's work is paradigmatic for the field and determines the further development of the topic. Eaton (2016) defines a good reason for the critical approach as the fact that it defines literature as the way to develop and express ecological awareness (p. 251). It is important to note that two great authors, whose works are considered to be foundational for the development of the tradition under consideration, are Henry David Thoreau and Rachel Carson. Kumar and Singh (2021) assert that the first and foremost concern of ecocriticism is the relationship between literature and the environment (p. 4214)

of Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, as it provides the context for the novel's themes of colonialism and racism. In the novel, Rhys employs the geographical and natural setting to represent imprisonment and freedom of her characters while at the same time addressing the effects of colonial plantations on the environment (pp. 148- 50). Çimen (2022) and

colonial tensions between the European

explains that in *A Passage to India* by E. M. Forster, the geography of India is used to depict the social Masters and the native Indians. The Marabar Caves are especially significant as a symbol of the vast and uninterrupted nature, which subverts imperialism and the concept of domination (p. 182).

[Mohammadzadeh \(2015\)](#) studies the novel with the help of a postcolonial approach, stressing the fact that the book speaks about the postcolonial effects on the environment in India. Mohammadzadeh also points out the fact that the cultural hybridity in *The God of Small Things* is presented more subtly. He notes that Roy's characters are a mix of Indian and British and that the characters' struggle with their identity is a result of colonial history. (pp. 977-90).

[Pirzadeh \(2019\)](#) talks about the postcolonial development in Pakistani fiction. She asserts that the impact of rapid industrialization, urbanization, and population growth on Pakistan's environment features prominently in its fiction. She says that the authors portray how these processes have led to environmental degradation, loss of biodiversity, pollution, and climate change. Socio-ecological degradation narratives highlight the unequal distribution of environmental costs and benefits, often disproportionately affecting marginalized communities (pp. 1-10).

[Majeed \(2014\)](#) says that the colonial powers, i.e., European powers, primarily used the resources of the colonized regions, and these resources were exploited for industrial and economic gains in the metropolis. In the process, various resources were extracted and carted off to the colonizer's homelands to fuel industrial processes, which led to environmental degradation in the colonies. This often involves large-scale environmental degradation—deforestation, soil depletion, and biodiversity loss. Such a form of land management, based on profit and extraction, during that country's colonial rule did not allow both the valuation and application of ecological knowledge and the sustainable practices of its people (p. 70).

3) Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework

3.1 Cheryll Glotfelty's Notion of Ecocriticism

Cheryll Glotfelty is one of the leading scholars in the field of ecocriticism and literary ecology. She co-edited the seminal anthology *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), which is considered to be one of the pioneering pieces in this field. Glotfelty's work deals with the theme of environmentalism and literature, arguing that the study of literature can help people develop critical environmental consciousness. Thus, in this essay, Glotfelty claims that literary studies should respond to the environmental shifts and the processes of the present. [Glotfelty \(1996\)](#) begins with a note on the magnitude of the environmental problems, including global climate change, the loss of species, and others that have become critical. Substantial attention was paid in the 1990s, the president of the United States of America proclaimed the 1990s as the decade of the environment, and Time magazine selected "The Endangered Earth" as the man of the year in 1989 (p. xx). Glotfelty also notes that while many cultural scholars and disciplines have been concerned with ecological matters since the 1990s, those attempts were rather dispersed. In response to this, Cheryl Glotfelty, co-edited with Harold Fromm, mobilizes several theorists and literary studies on the environmental issue. She provides a chronology of the development of environmental literature from 1885 to 1993, along with such important markers as [Waage \(1985\)](#) and [Nitecki's \(1989\)](#).

Glotfelty identifies three common motivations in Ecocritical work: environmental literacy, the acknowledgment of human impacts that harm the Earth's support systems, and the desire to fix them. She also points out that before the incorporation of ecological concerns into literary studies, History, Anthropology, Psychology, and Philosophy had already incorporated ecological considerations (p. xxiii). Glotfelty makes an attempt to link nature and the observer. As she puts it, ecocriticism deals with the interaction of the environment with culture, language, and literature (p. xix). Ecocriticism, as defined by its editor, is the analysis of the relationship between literature and the natural world (p. xviii). It aims at understanding how we are connected to the environment in the context of pollution and post-apocalyptic scenarios. Glotfelty formulated three

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4) Data Analysis

questions that should be answered in the framework of the analysis of the text from the Ecocritical perspective, which correspond to the three stages of the feminist critique (pp. xxii-xxiv). Firstly, analyzing the portrayal of nature to enhance the raising and recognition of stereotypical representations. This level is concerned with the way pictures are described in canonical texts. Secondly, it is worthwhile to expand and regain the discourses in the nature writing genres that evidence awareness. Some of the nature writers are Thoreau, Muir, Burrows, Leopold, and Carson in North America. Finally, the development of theoretical frameworks to solve essential questions about the representation of species with different paradigms. As a new theoretical framework in ecocriticism, Glotfelty describes ecofeminism as the correlation between women's subjugation and nature's domination (p. xxiv).

3.2 Research Methodology

The present research employs a qualitative approach, utilizing textual analysis as its primary research method.

3.2.1 Textual Analysis as a Research Method

Cultural criticism, according to Belsey, cannot do without textual analysis; it is a crucial tool in the conduct of research in the field. Therefore, the researcher has deemed textual analysis as a research method for the study since it is rooted in cultural studies. Belsey also mentions that, "[r]esearch is expected to contribute to knowledge; it uncovers something new.... research is expected to make a difference to the standard account of a topic" (p. 163). The view introduced in the present work can be considered rather original and fresh.

Belsey also points out in her essay that a text is made up of multiple meanings that are in relation to each other, including contestation. Thus, when reading and analyzing the chosen texts, the researcher identifies the 'multiple meanings' that can be derived from them and explains them within the framework of the chosen theory. The researcher decides to use *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, published in the year 1997.

For the analysis. With reference to Glotfelty's theory of ecocriticism, this research aims to

Establish the effect of ecological issues on the characters in the novel.

The novel powerfully illustrates the transition of the Meenachal River from a troupe of natural splendour to one of pollution and organic putrefaction, thus engaging with ecological anxiety. The river, which used to be a clean and significant water source, has turned into an embodiment of environmental pollution. Roy paints a picture of a polluted area and the adverse impacts of industrial effluents and urban development. Which is hazardous to human beings, i.e., "The river shrinks, and black crows gorge on bright mangoes in still, dustgreen trees." (Roy, 1997, p. 1). These vivid images, therefore, emphasize the effects of uncontrolled industrialization in the region and a foreign source of pollution in the native environment. Glotfelty, while talking about the portrayal of stereotypical images, recognizes and examines these natural images to create awareness. This quote from the text of the novel is creating that image; it's a stereotype of a postcolonial novel's natural environment, where the waste material from the factories, a symbol of development and progress, highlights the essential need to take measures against water pollution (p. xxii). Talking about the contamination of water in the subcontinent, it won't be unjust to say that most of the rivers and streams, which used to be clear, have now turned into open gutters. Irfan (2017) talks about the sewerage stream, commonly known as Nala Lai, which runs along the city and has become an open sewerage that drains the factory wastes, and many other polluted items in the Soan River, which has now been confined to a foul-smelling polluted stream (pp. 78-79). If the Meenachal River of Ayemenem and the Soan River of Rawalpindi, discussed in the above-mentioned article, are compared, then it would be easy to understand that just like the Meenachal River, the Soan River, in Punjab, Pakistan, has been subjected to the cruelty of industrialization and urbanization.

While the novel has focused on the specific places that have been deforested and the loss of trees and other plants and animals, the novel can be seen as a critique of the blatant and irresponsible exploitation of resources. The deforestation and the industrialization of the lands. While the novel has focused on the specific places that have been deforested and the loss of trees and

other plants and animals, the novel can be seen as a critique of the blatant and irresponsible exploitation of resources. The deforestation and the industrialization of the lands not only hurt human life but also reflect how the animals were dislocated. The use of the word, naked here gives out a message of affliction and barrenness of the land with no nature, no sign of life, and again, she paints a stereotypical picture of an underdeveloped society, which is using these natural resources to make people's factories run (p. xxii). Pakistan, which was once part of India, also went through the same processes of urbanization and modernization. The deforestation in the novel led to a barren land, and likewise, it left Pakistan with floods and mass dislocation. Azeem et al. (2023) maintain that Pakistan and Sri Lanka (part of South Asia) have been among the countries that were severely hit by heavy floods, claiming the lives of 1700 people and displacing about 709 million people. They also maintain that the Western countries owe these regions as they were the ones responsible for their bad conditions (pp. 1-10).

Roy discusses the effects of industrialization, representing how it results in deforestation and, therefore, the eradication of wildlife and their homes. There are concerns with how humans are perceiving and interacting with nature. The characters' actions and reactions to their surroundings are indicative of the people's overall perception of the responsibility to preserve or exploit the natural resources. Roy specifically talks about the relationship between industrialization and the people of Ayemenem. The factories and industrial activities also cause deforestation and soil erosion, water pollution, which is detrimental to the ecosystem, but nature never ceases to bloom, she jots down, "The old house on the hill wore its steep, gabled roof pulled over its ears like a low hat. The walls, streaked with moss, had grown soft and bulged a little with dampness that seeped up from the ground. The wild, overgrown garden was full of the whisper and scurry of small lives." (Roy, 1997, p. 35). The imagery highlights the power of nature to sprout even after the effects of industrialization on the environment and the detrimental results of such practices. The novel is taken as an ecological satire of the industrial development that occurred with no regard to the environment or people's welfare. When industrial

practices from colonial masters continued in the subcontinent, environmental exploitation was also deepened. Roy also questions the colonial government's mimicry of these exploitative practices, which are found in the novel. Glotfelty cues these depictions of nature as part of canonical literature (p. xxii). Her stance favours Roy's rendering of the poor and unhygienic living conditions of Ayemenem. At this point, literature and the characterization of nature in the novel are in harmony with each other and support Glotfelty's definition of ecocriticism.

Roy's story magnifies the problem of caste and economic differences, as well. The pollution highlighted throughout the novel impacts the vulnerable groups of people, making it an environmental justice novel. This is a clear depiction of how poorer sections of society are affected by environmental problems and have to dwell in areas that are most polluted and contaminated by industrial waste. She writes, "When the British came to Malabar, several Paravans, Pelayas, and Pulayas (among them Velutha's grandfather, Kelan) converted to Christianity and joined the Anglican Church to escape the scourge of Untouchability. As an added incentive, they were given a little food and money. They were known as the Rice-Christians. It didn't take them long to realize that they had jumped from the frying pan" (pp. 33-4). This is the line that highlights the issues of caste and environmental exploitation and economic differences, as well.

4.1 Analysis of Ecological Symbols and Motifs

The Meenachal River represents the clear water of Kerala's landscape. In terms of anthropology, it is a social asset and a means of support for the native population. It is worth mentioning that the river is depicted as a place of leisure and togetherness for the families, which underlines the significance of the river for the characters. She sublimely writes this beautiful line, "The river was quiet. The trees bent towards it as though they longed to clasp its coolness to their parched skin (Roy, 1997, p. 3). These are vivid scenes that depict the natural beauty of the river and its role in the traditions of Ayemenem. According to Glotfelty, Roy paints a subliminal picture of the beauty of Meenachal. Through her beautiful discourse, she tries to create a scenario of

how beautiful nature was before it was destroyed. Glotfelty supports Roy's depiction of nature as the point of creating awareness.

The history house is a repository of memories, both personal and collective. It holds the history of the Ayemenem House and its inhabitants. The way nature has infiltrated the structure can be seen as a metaphor for how the past permeates the present, with natural elements serving as a reminder of history's persistent influence: "A History shaped hole in the universe through which, at twilight, dense clouds of silent bats billowed like factory smoke and drifted into the night" (p. 272). Glotfelty, in her postulation of ecocriticism, explains that literary texts may give out an overall picture of the environment to let the reader have a better understanding of stereotypes that are making such situations (p. xxii).

5) CONCLUSION

5.1 Findings of the Study

This research ends with the findings that this narrative, *The God of Small Things* (1997), falls in the exact perspective of ecocriticism and ecology. It presents India as a conduit of colonial exploitation, environmental injustice, deteriorating economic and health conditions, turmoil, class disintegration, and stereotyping of patriarchy. Ecocriticism presents the relationship between nature and human beings. Arundhati Roy has seamlessly inculcated the environment of Ayemenem into the novel.

To a large extent, the author of *The God of Small Things* (1997) is seen telling and describing the environmental culture and its representations for the readers, since the described landscape is majorly affecting the lives of inhabitants of Ayemenem. With Roy's take on ecocriticism and the environment of Kerala, India, in a way, it wouldn't be inappropriate to say that Roy has courageously and openly talked about the politicized ecological concerns, which may pose a source of great assets to the interested parties. She has also spotlighted the deteriorating natural resources, used as a primary source of raw materials in the process of industrialization.

This is analyzed and proven in earlier chapters. Pakistan, as part of the geography of South Asia, is also going through the same poor living conditions as Ayemenem. The marginalized Eco factors, depicted in the novel, are not only related to nature

but also linked to the overlapping subjugation of gender, class, caste, and social hierarchies. Glotfelty's ecocriticism opens up the corridors of ecofeminism as well, where she analyses the pictures of nature to spot prejudices and bring awareness to the female gender in literature.

5.2 Recommendations for further Researchers

Theories like Glotfelty's ecocriticism encourage the mind to study and analyze literature from a new dimension, which helps to keep the interpretative spirit of literature alive. It does not label or limit any piece of literature to any specific theory, but it encourages academia with new tools and approaches that provide a new avenue beyond the previous viewpoints inferred from any piece of fiction. Based on this research, future researchers should consider that South Asian Anglophone writings may be explored from a number of perspectives. The researchers may explore other works of Arundhati Roy in the light of ecocriticism. Similarly, Roy's piece of writing could be explored through other theoretical underpinnings. The textual analysis of *TGST* (1997) also suggests that this primary text selected for this study can be analyzed from the theories of the postcolonial world. Since this narrative is written against the backdrop of postcolonial Ayemenem. Not only this, but the traumatic experiences of female characters can be easily analyzed in this novel. The portrayal of women can be analyzed as a marginalized ecoentity. Future researchers can investigate many precolonial and modern texts through Glotfelty's theory of ecocriticism to explore the interconnectedness of nature and literature. A comparative discussion can be generated by the approach of comparing and contrasting the precolonial and postcolonial natural surroundings, following expeditions and subcontinental wars. Even Trans cultural tropes can be traced in other works of Arundhati Roy.

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