

Eco-feminism in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

MOHAMMAD EKRAMUL HASSAN

Abstract. This paper will explore Arundhati Roy's novel, *The God of Small Things*, in the context of ecofeminism. In Indian subcontinent growing protests against environmental destruction and struggle for survival and existence have highlighted the inter-connections of feminist perspectives along with nature. I will try to argue how the Indian woman novelist, Arundhati Roy of modern time has highlighted this issue in her fiction *The God of Small Things*.

Keywords : Eco-feminism; environmental studies; Co-existence

Suzanna Arundhati Roy was born on 24 November, 1961. She is an Indian author and political activist. She is best known for the 1998 Man Booker Prize for Fiction-winning novel *The God of Small Things* (1997) and for her involvement in human rights and environmental causes. Roy's novel became the biggest-selling book by a non-expatriate Indian author.

Eco-feminism describes movements and philosophies that link feminism with ecology. (Mac Gregor 286) The term is believed to have been coined by the French writer Franciscine Eaubonne in her book, *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (Merchant 43). Women participated in the environmental movements, specifically preservation and conservation much earlier than this. Beginning in the late 19th century women worked in efforts to protect wildlife, food, air and water. Susan A. Mann, an eco-feminist and Professor of Sociological and feminist theory considers the roles women played in these activisms to be the starter for eco-feminism in later centuries. Mann associates the beginning of eco-feminism not with feminists but with women of different race and class backgrounds who made connections among gender, race, class and environmental issues. This ideal is upheld through the notion that in activist and theory circles marginalized groups must be included in the discussion. In early environmental and women's movements, issues of varying races and classes were often separated. (Mann 1-2)

Eco-feminism connects the exploitation and domination of women with that of the environment, and argues that there is historical connection between women and nature. Ecofeminists believe that this connection is illustrated through the traditionally 'female' values of reciprocity, nurturing and co-operation, which are present both among women and in nature. Women and nature are also united through their shared history of oppression by a patriarchal Western society.

Vandana Shiva claims that women have a special connection to the environment through their daily interactions and this connection has been ignored. She says that women in subsistence economies who produce “wealth in partnership with nature, have been experts in their own right of holistic and ecological knowledge of nature’s processes.” However, she makes the point that “these alternative modes of knowing, which are oriented to the social benefits and sustenance needs are not recognized by the capitalist reductionist paradigm, because it fails to perceive the inter-connectedness of nature, or the connection of women’s lives, work and knowledge with the creation of wealth”. (Shiva 34)

Feminist and social ecologist Janet Biehl has criticized eco-feminism for focusing too much on a mystical connection between women and nature and not enough on the actual conditions of women. (Biehl 23) Rosemary Radford Ruether joins Janet Biehl in having this focus on mysticism over work that focuses on helping women, but argues that spirituality and activism can be combined effectively in eco-feminism. (Ruether vii - xi)

Eco-conscious as Arundhati Roy is, her concern for the environment finds an adequate expression in *The God of Small Things*. The novel lays bare how the environment is subjected to decay and destruction and points out the reasons that lie behind it, too. Once Ayemenem was rich in vegetation. Esther and Rahel dreamt of the river Meenachal in their childhood :

It was warm, the water Grey green, like ripped silk
with fish in it, with the sky and trees in it. And at
night, the broken yellow moon in it. (Roy 40)

After twenty – three years, Rahel returned and the river “greeted her with a ghastly skull’s smile, with holes where teeth had been and a limp hand raised from a hospital bed. Though it was a month of 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 under water . Bronze-winged lily-trotters walked across it. Splay – footed, caution. The river was no more than “a slow, sludging green ribbon lawn that ferried fetid garbage to the sea now”. (124) Estha too, found that the river “smelled of shit, and pesticides bought with World Bank loans. Most of the fish had died. The ones that survived suffered from fin-rot and had broken out in boils. (13)

Besides the river Meenachal, the village Ayemenem once known for freshness, matchless greenery and rural quietness has changed. Its population has swelled to the size of little town. Estha finds “the new, freshly-baked, iced, Gul-money houses built by nurses, masons, wire benders and bank clerks who worked hard and unhappily in far away places. The state of Karri Saipu, known as History

House has been renovated and converted into a five star hotel called 'Heritage'. The locality is described as 'God's own country' in hotel brochures. But the locality is quite unhygienic because of its bad smell. The Ayemenem House, "a grand old house" having history of its own is in a miserable condition.

In short, there is affluence in Ayemenem but its scenic beauty and natural harmony has gone. A decimal scene of pollution and decay is visible everywhere. As a minute observer of both civilization and nature, Arundhati Roy has presented a clear picture of India through Ayemenem. In hot and senseless pursuit of immediate gain, man has broken relations with living beings and inanimate things. In search of material pleasure and comfort, future is rejected, and hence, there is clarion call from Arundhati Roy to preserve nature and save future.

Arundhati Roy believes in action. She knows that women and the environment are both exploited as passive pawns in the race to domination. Those people in power are able to take advantage of them distinctly because they are seen as passive and rather helpless. Arundhati Roy is neither passive nor helpless. As an eco-feminist, she feels that women must work towards creating a healthy environment and ending the destruction of the lands that most women rely on to provide for their families. In her effort of 'Narmada BachaoAndolan', she was arrested along with the women and was put into jail. During her interview to David Barsamian, she relates the story:

It was absolutely fantastic. I was in a village Sulgaon. All night, all over the valley, people started arriving, by tractor, by motorcar, by foot. By three in the morning there were about 5,000 of us. We started walking in the dark to the dam site. The people already knew that the dam site would be captured, but they didn't know from where the people would come. There's a huge area of devastation there. So we walked in the dark. It was amazing. Five thousand people, mostly villagers, but also people from the cities – lawyers, architects, journalists – walking through these byways and crossing streams in absolute silence. There was not a person that lit a bidi or coughed or cleared their throats. Occasionally, a whole group of women would sit down and pee and then keep walking. Finally, at dawn, we arrived and took over the dam site. For hours, the police surrounded us. Then there was a baton charge. They arrested thousands of people, including me. The jails were full. (Interview)

Obviously, Eco-feminism is one of the core issues of Arundhati Roy. She can safely be included in the group of "Women for Life on Earth" who initiated the movement against nuclear weapons and nuclear technology in 1981. She can be included in the group of women of the chipko struggle of India, the group of women who initiated an organized movement to bring *Purusha* and *Prakriti* together (Shiva 47) in a perfect harmony towards a better world and safe future (Leachy 33)

As an ecofeminist, she desires to end patriarchal domination both on women and environment. Obviously, it is interesting to study her works more in the light of ecofeminism than that of feminism. First, she is an ecofeminist and then feminist. She belongs to the group of MeraBehn, BimlaBehn, SarlaBehn and many others.

Mohammad Ekramul Hassan

Research Scholar, Dept. of English
Magadh University, Bodh-Gaya
E-mail : ekram.hassan@gmail.com

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