

The Woman and the Non- Human in Roy's the God of Small Things

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Abstract

In a patriarchal culture the re-presentation of images creates both the subjectification of men and the objectification of women. While the woman in the cultural world emerges as the object of the male gaze, the non human in the natural world emerges the object of the human gaze. Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things is a green manifesto as well as a structural re- presentation of patriarchal cultural imagery. Roy's text reflects the repressed images of nature. Roy concentrates on merging the fragile ecological network and the human world. She yokes culture and nature as two intimately interconnected systems thereby provoking prominent patriarchal cultural re-presentations. This paper seeks to focus on how the male gaze constructs re-presentations that define women and the non human alike. The paper also seeks the interconnections between Freud's "return of the repressed" as reflected in Roy's efforts to link the human and the natural world.

Keywords: Patriarchal, culture, nature, Roy, Freud

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is a green manifesto as well as a structural re-presentation of patriarchal cultural imagery. An avid supporter of anti-dam, anti-nuclear, anti-American movements and an authentic, articulate Third World voice, Roy eco-feminizes not just at a textual level but creates a complex network of exploitative relationships within the fictional framework. Roy expounds the political potential of ecofeminism by making exploitation occur at variant levels of nature, class, sex, age, and race. She places both the human victim and the non human at the lower rung of the hierarchical ladder. The kind of exploitation that occurs in Roy's text is one that follows the dualism enshrined by Western patriarchy.

Roy sees the twin oppressions- of woman (culture) and of non-human (nature) as intertwined and defined by patriarchal dualism. It is this dualism that also structures the inferiorisation process of the woman and of nature. She views the dualistic ideology of patriarchy as structuring the feminization of nature and the naturalization/animalization of woman. Roy is more a social ecofeminist who sees the dualism as also contextually structured.

Ecofeminists assert that within the paradigm of political theories and social practices there is a connection between the destruction of nature by humans and the denigration of women by men whereby both women and nature are perceived as objects to be owned or controlled. Throughout Roy's text, Nature remains a throbbing presence which behaves in tune with the human emotions and moves from progress to degeneration. In *The God of Small Things*, patriarchal, mercantile and imperialist systems exploit women and nature equally. The plight of the Narmada valley people and Velutha are linked through Roy's ecofeminist perspective. Roy expounds the social impact of the industrial development and privatized resources in the imagery of the Kathakali men and the fisher folk.

If as per the law of ecology, "everything is connected to everything else" then literature cannot be seen as separate from other systems. Literature is in itself an ideological product of the culture and shaped by it. In spite of its postmodern structure, Roy's text does not see Nature as a cultural construct. Rather, she juxtaposes nature (non human)/ woman (culture) on a horizontal plane making representations of patriarchal and male centered systems.

Roy concentrates on merging the fragile ecological network and the human world. She yokes culture and nature as two intimately interconnected systems thereby provoking prominent patriarchal cultural re-presentations. However, in a patriarchal culture the re-presentation of images creates both the subjectification of men and the objectification of women. In the patriarchal culture, images of women are constructed by men and hence also represent themselves through the 'male gaze'. Thus it is not only the woman who is objectified but also the male subject who undergoes a simultaneous subjectification.

Similarly the 'human gaze' constructs the viewer of nature thereby objectifying the nonhuman/nature. It is this paradox of the dualism of standing within a system and yet being constructed by that Roy's textual imagery abounds in. The image of the dish antenna installed which is held responsible for the 'smothered' exotic garden fuses the human and the non-human and also links the knotted wildness of the garden to the knotted life of Baby Kochamma. Moreover the frame within which Ammu is placed polarizes both Velutha and Ammu.

In the text, being both male and capitalist Chacko has both the cultural power and the economic power to 'gaze' at the image of Velutha and Ammu. The appropriation of the 'male gaze' fuses the female image of Ammu with the non-human image of the wild. These structures of representation re-present and hence trap women and the non-human within the 'male gaze' facilitated by the discourse of patriarchy. Being objectified, women and the non-human become objects of the male vision. Thus in a knowledge driven vision of the woman, the male exercises a primary epistemological faculty. While the woman in the cultural world emerges as the object of the male gaze, the non human in the natural world emerges the object of the human gaze.

In the images of Rahel and Ammu, Roy represents the mechanisms that objectify women namely the discourse of the domestication, the animalization and the feminization of woman. Roy shifts from the wild woman image to the passive one, "*Like a lion-tamer she tamed twisting vines and nurtured bristling cacti...she waged war on the weather.*" (GST 27). Roy's text recognizes the Eurocentric construction of masculinity as an unstable representation that appears "not-nature" and "not-female." The Eurocentric patriarchal core which Roy's text reflects is the culturally constructed fear that nature and the elemental power of the female are potentially chaotic and hence to be contained/subverted by the will of the cultural fathers.

The 'superior' configuration with the logic of the domination of the male over the female and the nature is reflected in the familial relationships in the text. In the delineation of the character of Ammu and Chacko, Roy brings in the Eurocentric notion of "the masculine" association with culture, autonomy, assertiveness, and the public sphere, and "the feminine" association with emotion, body, nature, connectedness, and the private sphere. The patriarchal dualism sees Nature's destruction and woman's subjugation as methods to the progress of the intellect.

Roy does not focus on a homogenous relationship of domination and subjugation. Rather she delineates a complex network of power relations that is almost Foucaultian. As ecofeminist fiction, *The God of Small Things* represents complex, exploitative relationships at variant levels of nature, class, sex, age, and race and works to make the thin line between power and resistance visible in an imaginative way. Though patriarchal dualism is centrally functional, the text also works on the different types of oppression- imperialism, patriarchy, classism, 'adulthood' and naturism. Roy also points out the remnants of the imperialist power not only in the dualistic discourse of patriarchy but also in the cultural and economic assumptions or rather the burden of the internalized cultural values.

The inferiorisation process of woman, nature and child occurs simultaneously in the economic oppression and child sexual abuse which serve as contexts for the visibility of patriarchal power. Women in Roy's text are "sleeping partners" both economically and sexually. In the text the levels of hierarchical exploitation merge and the oppressed and the oppressor function through containment within the dualism rather than through exclusive categorization.

Roy in describing the violent brutality committed by the police to Velutha in the History House hints at primal terror, "feelings...of contempt born of inchoate, unacknowledged fear—civilization's fear of nature, men's fear of women, power's fear of powerlessness...Man's subliminal urge to destroy what he could neither subdue or deify" (GST 308). The love between Ammu and Velutha transgresses established social codes and is parallel to nature which too needs to be contained.

If the civilized intellect is male in dualistic thinking, then its need for subjugating women and nature is seen in the destruction of nature and the denigration of women. In *The God of Small Things*, the oppressed forms of woman, outcaste and nature exist in the lowest rung of the hierarchical ladder. The male gaze constructs re-presentations that define women and the non human alike. The woman Ammu shrinks from a vibrant lady love to a woman with unseeing eyes; Velutha, a social outcaste shrinks to a statistical figure to be removed off records and the Ayemenem river too shrinks through agricultural convenience.

“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. (118-119)

Roy makes the contrasting images of nature in the text move from progress to denigration in a linear way to show how nature and the lives of the oppressed human are interlinked. Nature becomes a metaphor for the human condition in the text. The lovers, Ammu and Velutha recognize a parallel in the transgressive attitude of the spider they name Lord Rubbish. Moreover, Velutha, the only marginalized male also identifies his body with nature. But his marginalization unlike that of the woman and nature still is “less” marginalized by virtue of his identity as the god of small things. The text shows how dualistic patriarchy contextually permits the oppressor the advantage of loveless promiscuity while denying the woman the ability to genuinely love or be loved.

The interconnections between Freud’s “return of the repressed” is reflected in Roy’s efforts to link the human and the natural world. At a psychological level, identity constructed by culture and nature can be seen as the expression of an individuality repressed by societal demands. The establishment of a society is sanctioned by rules and limits to contain transgression.

Love as Freud states is man’s primal search for pleasure. *Super ego* or culture as the conscience of civilization coerces repression in the human and the non human alike. The woman in order to be defined within accepted norms of male honor represses sexual instincts (as witnessed in Ammu’s inability to further transgress sexual norms), and repression as the compulsion of the super ego represses animal instincts in the human thereby repressing nature.

Culture functions as the super ego in the text and is a manifestation of the internalized rules and limits of institutionalized systems. Hence if culture is sanctioned by patriarchal authority, then woman and nature are victims of both a physical and psychological oppression. Individual and collective, the superego contains the *ego* just as much the ego contains the *id*. Even if the dictionary defines sexuality as sexual preference, it is also important not to ignore the sensuousness repressed in institutionalized definitions.

Roy’s description of sexuality appears obscene to a repressed reader, however a non repressive reading reveals that sensuousness in love is in fact the natural effort to express the repressed. If Roy eroticizes both ‘love’ making and Nature in her text, it is not just out of aesthetic sensibility; rather it is to prove that eroticization of woman and nature is but an act of non repressive sublimation. Roy’s text reflects the repressed images of nature:

The river shrinks ...Red bananas ripen. Jackfruits burst...Slanting silver ropes slammed into loose earth, ploughing it up like gunfire. A crow with a crushed wing...A clenched chicken’s claw... A dam had burst and savage waters swept everything up in a swirling. Comets, violins, parades,loneliness, clouds, beards, bigots, lists, flags, earthquakes, despair were all swept up in a scrambled swirling. (GST 15)

Roy interlocks repression at different levels of hierarchy and speaks of a decentralized power which is more in line with Foucaultian power. Dualism in fact facilitates dualistic thinking as for instance visually judging the body and the mind as separate. This culturally facilitated vision serves to render the body an object of gaze and also to relate the human and the non human. However the positive productivity of dualism lies in the dispersed nature of power it creates. The discursive formation of dualisms originated in the West. Roy’s text does pertain to a dualistic patriarchy nevertheless in a typical ecofeminist move she intersects the dualism with different levels of oppression thereby partially liberating ecofeminism from a colonizing framework.

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