

Caste, Waste, and Environmental Injustice in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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ABSTRACT: *This research explores the connection between caste hierarchy and environmental degradation in Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things (1997) and how this relationship connects to ecological and material degradation. The study aims to uncover Roy's use of ritual pollution as a discourse connecting social marginalisation and environmental injustice, rather than treating caste and ecology as separate issues. The paper adopts qualitative close textual analysis, drawing on Mary Douglas's (1966) theories of purity and pollution, Rob Nixon's (2011) concept of slow violence, and postcolonial ecocriticism by Huggan and Tiffin (2010) to highlight the social and ecological violence found in the Meenachal River, Paradise Pickles and Preserves, the Love Laws, and Velutha. The analysis shows how caste exclusion, postcolonial capitalism, and unequal power are deeply interconnected, linking the exploitation of Velutha with environmental degradation. The study ultimately demonstrates that social marginalisation and unequal power relations cause ecological injustice among disadvantaged communities.*

Keywords: Caste, Waste, Environmental Injustice, Untouchability, Slow Violence, *The God of Small Things*

INTRODUCTION

Arundhati Roy begins her Booker Prize-winning novel *The God of Small Things* (1997) with a description of the weather rather than an introduction to its characters: "May in Ayemenem is a hot, brooding month" (Roy, 1997, p. 1). Roy's story further combines caste hierarchy, gendered transgression and postcolonial history into such a complex structure that critics explore almost three decades of scholarship along these three strands (Tickell, 2007). However, the novel's connection to the damaged ecology of Kerala, particularly the Meenachal River and the landscape of Ayemenem, is not focused strongly. Roy portrays the gradual degradation of this environment alongside the suffering and downfall

of Velutha, the novel's Dalit protagonist, creating a close relationship between ecological decline and social oppression. This paper shows caste hierarchy and environmental degradation are not two related themes that are connected by a similar setting, but one social-ecological system structured around a single logic, the logic of purity and pollution. The same vocabulary that describes how a contaminating touch is felt by the reader describes the river as "swollen with sewage" and "black" from industrial waste; structurally, the reader is asked to see the two types of pollution as analogues. These are not thematic adjacent concepts of caste and ecology, but rather a combination of both, as the social waste of Velutha's labour, love and life, and the effluent from the Meenachal are both discussed in the same novel. Instead of the two concepts functioning as adjacent themes, they both are discussed in the novel of reading waste, both the literal effluent that chokes the Meenachal, and the social waste of Velutha's labour, love and life.

The novel's representation of caste and ecology is not limited to the occasional mention of caste or the natural world. Most significantly, Roy's language demonstrates the way caste ideology is manifested at the sentence level, and the patterns of diction and description are repeated to describe the decay of the river. It also helps to account for the novel's environmental descriptions, which have a good deal of moral connotations that are not merely setting, but are integral to the novel itself. The river is not just a backdrop but a second body, the object of a discipline, a degradation and a pollution, which are similar to what Velutha undergoes. The human body and the natural environment are thus both influenced by the same historical and social processes. This argument is important not just in the context of the novel. *The God of Small Things* (1997) emerges as a significant literary work that connects readers in and outside India to issues of caste, social inequity and environmental degradation. These issues are connected to a single narrative, thus providing a deeper understanding of how these forms of violence may become deeply interrelated. The objective of this research is to demonstrate that the novel employs a single, consistent vocabulary of pollution across both registers, and that the novel is already a model of the kind of integrated, intersectional reading that later theoretical approaches would formalise.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of caste in *The God of Small Things* (1997) has been the subject of scholarly discussion for a long time. Early postcolonialists read the novel through the lens of untouchability and power relations, suggesting that the novel instead of just a negotiation of power between "Untouchables" and "Touchables" in economic subordination takes place within a social grammar that is not just economic, but pervasive and internalised (Utami 2008, p. 4). The study revisits Bhatnagar's (2006) study of the Dalit character in the modern Indian novel which places Velutha in the larger literary tradition in which the untouchable figure is also a character who carries the narrative sympathy and narrative sacrifice. In the novel, Ammu's love affair with Velutha is regarded as a rebellion against the established order which is passed down through generations, a rebellion against the caste-based system of love relationships that is enforced by certain rules, the Love Laws, as described by Roy (1997): Rules that lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much (Ainie, Candraningrum and Setyabudi, 2013, p. 6). Roy's own nonfiction work on caste, especially her long introduction to B. R. Ambedkar's (2014) *Annihilation of Caste*, offers an important interpretive framework because Roy, in this text, regards caste as the "wound" at the "roots" of Indian society, which has yet to heal (Roy, 2017)).

Another strand of criticism in the novel is in terms of body and senses, in the context of untouchability. When Ammu reveals herself to be the woman who had been living with Velutha, from the Paravan community, Ilancheliyan (2015), for example, notes how Mammachi reacts in a visceral manner. Her answer is that it is “*Like a dog with a bitch on beat*” (Roy, 1997, p. 209). It demonstrates how disgust and bodily revulsion is a way in which caste prejudice is manifested. Here, in this text, there is no social argument of caste, but rather the sense of nausea and contamination. These bodily responses also foreshadow the language of pollution that Roy will later apply to the river and the surrounding environment. The description of the Paravan body as “expected” to “He had swept his footprints away himself. Crawling backwards with a broom” (Roy, 1997, p. 190) is another illustration of the same. This practice implies that the untouchability is not just a social constraint, but also a spatial and ecological governance. The Paravan body serves as a contamination that needs to be physically separated from common ground, thus illustrating the regulation of the body’s presence as well as access to space (Alam, 2002).

There is a second strand of scholarship that argues for the novel’s position in the postcolonial field of ecocriticism. In this sense, Indian fiction in English often represents environmental crisis as a continual process of colonial and postcolonial resource extraction and caste-determined labour, as Roy repeatedly highlights the pollution of the river. In the name of this, Mukherjee (2010) states that Indian fiction in English has a tendency to encode environmental crisis as a “continuous process of colonial and postcolonial resource extraction and caste-assigned labour” (p. 89). More generally, Huggan and Tiffin (2010) demand that there can be no separation between environmental and social justice in previously colonised societies as ecological degradation is regularly pushed onto the subjugated populations of race, caste or class (p. 6). Two of these studies focus specifically on the Meenachal as an object of literature: a river-centric ecocritical reading states that the Meenachal “from a powerful metaphor representing the justice of the natural love relation between Velutha and Ammu, to representing the immoral social conventions of postcolonial India” ((Bessedik, 2017, p. 1) and a companion study on the river’s symbolism finds that the Meenachal is a place of both physical and psychological estrangement for the twins, which fails to preserve those who rely on it (Mitra, 2024).

“Slow violence” — the idea of violence that is “incremental and accretive,” that occurs incrementally and largely out of sight, out of mind, out of consciousness” (Nixon 2011 p. 2) has been a major lens to view environmental harm in the literature of the global South. Nixon’s (2011) structure was intended to reveal “the kind of violence that can only be glimpsed amidst its many moving parts, in which no spectacular event is present” (2011, p. 3) for readers or institutions to miss. The reviewers of Nixon’s (2011) study have pointed out that it “will, I think, become what it aspires to be: a foundational text of an ‘environmental humanities’ that also conjugates ecologism, anti-imperialism and anti-capitalism” (Pratt, 2012, p. 1). Gender, caste, and ecology are made more explicitly to overlap in Roy’s fiction, as can be seen from a comparative ecofeminist analysis between Roy and Namita Gokhale, which shows that Ammu is a space where all the exploitation of women and of nature are interconnected (Reddy and Rao, 2025, p. 3). This article builds on that line of thinking and foregrounds waste specifically, not just gender or nature more broadly, as the link between caste hierarchy and ecological damage, with a view to following the long direction of the caste-based division of sanitation and pollution-handling labour from Dalit studies. This argument can also be understood within the broader critical debate surrounding Roy’s political representation of caste and class, particularly the deceptive picture painted of the Kerala

Communist Party in the novel, which has been condemned by party leaders as “factually incorrect” (Kumar, 2002). Such objections are made not so much about caste as about Communist politics, but they are a reminder that Roy’s novel is a literary artifact and makes aesthetic and political decisions, and is not a sociological record. Therefore, this paper is an analysis of the novel as a text in which images are patterned in a way that itself constitutes an argument, not as a simple historical account.

The novel represents the untouchability as embodied, sensory, and not just social; the novel represents the river Meenachal as a load-bearing symbolic structure, not just scenery; and Indian environmental fiction as a whole routinely, and without difficulty, embeds ecological and caste politics. This convergence has not yet resulted in a sustained analysis of how Roy’s text introduces into structural relation the language of pollution and death, that is, the language of the caste. The death of the river is not only a parallel to Velutha’s death, but is also a continuous structure of pollution, degradation and violence, as revealed by a sentence level reading.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is based upon three complementary theoretical resources, each providing a different analytical vocabulary. First, Mary Douglas’s (1966) anthropological theory of purity and pollution claims that notions of dirt and defilement are not natural truths but social constructs of boundary markers, namely “dirt” itself being “out of place” in a particular classificatory system (p. 35). Douglas’s (1966) understanding that pollution beliefs serve as a means of maintaining social order is directly relevant to a novel in which the pollution associated with touch is not based on any material characteristic of Velutha but is rather a result of the caste ideology that sees him as polluted. Second, Rob Nixon’s (2011) idea of slow violence brings into view environmental damage as a process that unfolds over time, and is often “dispersed across time and space” (p. 2). The usefulness of Nixon’s (2011) plan lies in the fact that the degradation of the Meenachal in the novel does not occur in one catastrophic event, but builds up over the course of the novel’s two timelines, only becoming apparent to the reader through the accretive juxtaposition of the river’s former vitality and its present stagnation. The connection between ecological harm and caste harm is provided by the related argument advanced by Nixon (2011) that slow violence has a disproportionate impact on “the environmentalism of the poor” (p. 4). The poor are the ones who suffer disproportionately if the poor are the people with the least social power. Third, postcolonial ecocriticism, as defined by Huggan and Tiffin (2010), requires the scholarly examination of literature to be sensitive to social hierarchies, caste, class and race which constitute who is at risk of environmental harm and who is not. Together, these three frameworks make the transformation of the Meenachal River from a living and connective force.

METHODOLOGY

This study is qualitative and interpretive, and uses the postcolonial ecocritical theory along with close reading of the text as models as applied in literary studies of single texts. Selected passages from the primary text, Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1997), are obtained through purposive sampling and include some of the more significant ones pertaining to the river, the pickle factory, the History House, the Love Laws and Velutha’s labour and death, relevant to the theme of caste and ecological degradation. All page references in this study are based on the first Indian edition of *The God of Small Things* (1997), published by IndiaInk. Page numbers may vary across other editions. Secondary sources include peer reviewed journal articles and theses in post-colonial studies, ecocriticism and caste studies that have been chosen for triangulation of the textual analysis with prevailing theoretical terminology. The analysis is

thematic and does not follow a chronological order, but is organised around four motifs: (1) the river as a caste-ecological register; (2) the pickle factory as a place where caste labour and environmental production converge; (3) the Love Laws, as a boundary-maintaining mechanism that is structurally similar to the discourse on contamination of the environment; and (4) Velutha's body as the space where these three registers meet most explicitly. In each motif, textual evidence is taken from both the childhood timeline (1969) and the adult timeline (1993 (novel's narrative present) to facilitate analysis of how the same places and bodies are described on the novel's different timelines. Secondary scholarship is employed both to fix the various argumentations that have been made about these passages and to assess the distinctiveness of the present one, the one based on waste.

FINDINGS

The analysis of four thematic areas shows that social and ecological boundary violations are expressed through contamination and defilement. As the narrative continues and the child Rahel, Estha and Velutha experience a present-day time frame, the Meenachal River, the site of cross-caste contact and freedom for the child characters, becomes increasingly "thick and greasy" with industrial and human waste, and this material decline is told in parallel to rather than apart from the body and desire of Velutha's destruction and Ammu's punishment. The pickle factory, Paradise Pickles and Preserves, is a microcosm of this system: a place of legitimate economic production that relies on the cheap wages of the Paravan population; a factory that literally creates chemical pollution that is harmful to the river, while also being detrimental to the labour force that is required to operate it. The Love Laws are a boundary-maintaining system whose logic is similar to the spatial division of the environment, and the smell, touch and, in the end, corporeal destruction of Velutha's body is what makes caste pollution and ecological pollution clearly interchangeable in Roy's text.

THE RIVER AS CASTE-ECOLOGICAL REGISTER

The Meenachal River changes its character on the novel's two timelines, mirroring the destruction of Velutha. The river in the childhood timeline is a place of life, as the twins say, "It was warm, the water. Graygreen. Like rippled silk. With fish in it. With the sky and trees in it" (Roy, 1997, p. 124). It is the river where Velutha swims, where the twins learn to trust him, and where inter-caste relations become momentarily, precariously possible. Now, however, by the time of the present of the novel, the same river is no longer recognizable: When the novel's narrator, Rahel as an adult, returns to the past, she finds that "Eventually, by evening, the river would rouse itself to accept the day's offerings and sludge off to the sea, leaving wavy lines of thick white scum in its wake. Upstream, clean mothers washed clothes and pots in unadulterated factory effluents. People bathed. Severed torsos soaping themselves, arranged like dark busts on a thin, rocking, ribbon lawn" (Roy, 1997, p. 126).

This decline does not simply result from a change in setting. Rather, it reflects the deeper social and ecological transformations that influence the world of the novel. The unchecked growth of the post-colonial capitalism of the industrialized sectors, the decay of communal means of ecological management and the continued existence of caste hierarchy within a modernising state that presents the image of 'Communist Kerala' all contribute to an alternate degradation of the river and the loss of caste, in the case of Velutha, of social status (Mukherjee, 2010, p. 91). Roy places these two types of decay in close relationship. The social world around Velutha has become more hostile and marginalising, as

the river grows increasingly polluted. The relationship takes on an even greater importance when viewed in the context of Rob Nixon's (2011) concept of slow violence. The pollution of the river is not one big dramatic event; it slowly gradually penetrates the landscape, and is not noticed by the people who live there. The same applies to caste violence. The marginalisation of Velutha is being created by the everyday behaviours of caste prejudice, social exclusion and denying him a place in the community. These acts of violence continue to go largely unnoticed until they reach their end in his brutal killing by the police. The parallel deterioration of the river and of Velutha's situation is used to show how violence is able to seep into the normal rhythms of social and ecological life before it is fully formed and is expressed at its most visible and devastating (Nixon, 2011, p. 2). This parallel is formalized in Roy's return to the river at the novel's most violent moments: it is in the river that the twins wait for Estha; it is across the river that Velutha swims to his final encounters with Ammu, who is described "When he reached the other side he emerged gleaming and pulled himself ashore, black as the night that surrounded him, black as the water he had crossed" (Roy, 1997, p. 289), where Velutha's blackness is fused with the river's own encroaching blackness.

The river also becomes the site of Sophie Mol's death, where she drowns and the river receives her body, showing it as a silent witness to a catastrophe for which it bears no responsibility yet becomes implicated in its aftermath. Roy writes, "There was no storm-music. No whirlpool spun up from the inky depths of the Meenachal. No shark supervised the tragedy. Just a quiet handing-over ceremony. A boat spilling its cargo. A river accepting the offering" (Roy, 1997, p. 293). The river is personified by Roy as an entity that 'accepts' the body which creates a quiet but unsettling quality in the scene. The river is not to blame for the tragedy or involved in it. Rather, it passively takes in Sophie Mol's body as the consequences of the family's actions take place. In the context of Ammu and Velutha's relationship, this image has a much deeper meaning. Their love is unnatural in their world, a violation of their caste and social rules, and the family feels this contamination must be violently expelled. Sophie Mol's body is accepted by the river as a prelude to the later treatment of Velutha's body by the police. The two scenes create an interesting parallel between the body of Sophie Mol accepted by the river and the police violence towards Velutha's body. In this parallel, Roy considers the killings of Sophie Mol and Velutha to be instances of the social order of Ayemenem, where caste prejudice equates transgression with contamination and bodies are places where social anxieties are violently dispelled.

THE PICKLE FACTORY AND THE ECONOMY OF WASTE

The factory is a family business, and the labor power of the individual is an indispensable and unrecognized force, especially in the case of Paravans, such as Velutha, who are skilled carpenters and factory workers. Roy explains that Velutha has an outstanding mechanical ability. To Mammachi's regret, Chacko proudly tells her that he could have had become an engineer if he was not a Paravan. This conditional possibility is a main focus of the novel since the nature of his abilities and potential is not a lack of talent but a caste identity imposed upon him.

The labour organisation of the factory entails material waste, the smell of the vinegar and asafoetida, which fills Ayemenem, and the flow that ends up in the river, and which, despite the fact that his skill keeps the factory running, is, in the eyes of the factory, still invisible. This is similar to the Dalit studies critique of the history of sanitation, disposal and 'polluting' labour under the caste ideology and its reliance on a caste population that it considers ritually polluted (Guru 2009, p. 12). It is a miniature

argument where environmental and caste injustice are interwoven rather than isolated, the fact that the factory's operation depends on the labour of Velutha is hardly incidental, and neither is the need for a river to receive its effluent, and in both cases the supplier of the labour and the effluent is regarded as dispensable once it has served its purpose.

Mammachi's reaction to the news of Ammu's affair with Velutha makes this economy of use and disposal obvious. She takes Velutha, one minute, from indispensable craftsman to contaminating animal: "The sound of their breathing. His particular Paravan smell. Like animals, Mammachi thought and nearly vomited. *Like a dog with a bitch on heat*" (Roy, 1997, p. 209). Nausea has nothing to do with incidental description: it is the somatic performance of Douglas's (1966) pollution logic, which is one in which the dominant party feels the violation as being almost unintentionally repulsive to the body rather than as a reasoned objection. The same register of nausea and defilement is repeated, interestingly, in the novel's depictions of the polluted river, implying that Roy consciously works to have the reader experience both forms of disgust as stylistically identical.

THE LOVE LAWS AS ENVIRONMENTAL BOUNDARY

The Love Laws that Roy restates over and over again in the novel as defining "Only that once again they broke the Love Laws. That lay down who should be loved" (Roy, 1997, p. 328). It is strongly linked to how Roy portrays contamination and ecological degradation in the novel. The Love Laws (Roy, 1997, p. 33) appears for the first time in the novel in the first chapter, as a general reflection on the social rules that govern love; they assume their force when Ammu and Velutha become conscious of each other as sexual beings: "Ammu saw that he saw. She looked away. He did too. History's fiends returned to claim them. To re-wrap them in its old, scarred pelt and drag them back to where they really lived" (Roy, 1997, p. 168). In this one, History becomes almost tangible. The "pelt" image implies a covering which collects bodies that transcend defined social boundaries and brings them back into the social structures that regulate togetherness. The novel's conception of the river is then similarly one that takes and gives back what is put in. Then, there's the imagery of containment, the river and the Love Laws; both bodies that traverse the social boundaries are drawn back into the structures that govern social and ecological life.

Waste is separated from good water like the desire to cross caste barriers. Violations of these limits and the ensuing violence comprise the core of the novel. Roy sees this sin not only as a social sin but as a sin of transgression and defilement. The implications of the Love Laws are especially apparent in Velutha's subsequent soliloquy: "If he touched her he couldn't talk to her, if he loved her he couldn't leave, if he spoke he couldn't listen, if he fought he couldn't win" (Roy, 1997, p. 217). The chapter shows how thorough caste barriers are with regard to the most intimate of the possibilities that Velutha could have with Ammu. The Love Laws are not just about the kinds of desires that are forbidden. There is no room in which such desire can exist without punishment. This constraint is echoed in the river's transformation from a wide, flowing body of water to "a swollen drain" (Roy, 1997, p. 124). The free-flowing river can no longer carry the water, and neither can the social world of the novel. The novel's social world denies Velutha the freedom to cross the boundaries set upon him, as the free-flowing river denies the water its freedom. Roy therefore associates the degradation of the river with the repression of forbidden desire, and both phenomena as effects of boundaries that are inhibiting movement, demarcating permissible from impermissible and, in the end, creating violence. In this pattern, one can discern the social hierarchy that Huggan and Tiffin (2010) refer to

when they state that postcolonial environments contain the social hierarchy within the seemingly natural groupings of clean/dirty, safe/dangerous (p. 12). The Love Laws, like a zoning ordinance, don't say they are arbitrary—they come to the characters who are charged with enforcing them as a description of the natural way the world works, as cultural disgust is to the culture-believing characters (Douglas, 1966, p. 35).

VELUTHA'S BODY AND THE LANGUAGE OF CONTAMINATION

Caste and ecological pollution come together most clearly in the novel when the body of Velutha is examined before and after the police beat him. Velutha remains closely associated with the river and with images of an uncontaminated natural world throughout his life. When he was a child, he is described as “a brown leaf on a black back,” indicating that he is part of nature. The river is also the place outside of the limits of the home and social hierarchy it embodies, where his interaction with the twins and ultimately with Ammu becomes more than just a domestic and family affair. The question that continually repeats throughout the narrative, ““Who was he, the one-armed man? Who could he have been? The God of Loss? The God of Small Things?” (Roy, 1997, p. 207) presents Velutha as a character with “surplus meaning” but who is “disposable” to the caste system that the novel portrays.

The early connotations of Velutha are therefore replaced by a stark image of physical violence committed against him in the course of his final meeting with Ammu: “Four of his ribs were splintered ... His spine was damaged in two places” (Roy, 1997, p. 310). Clinically and in terms of their structure, these sentences are quite distinct from the lyrical descriptions that are linked to the river. The narration depicts the destruction of Velutha in bits and pieces, by reducing his body to a series of injuries. His body is dismembered into broken pieces, like the river is earlier transformed from a living natural entity to a list of pollution and loss. The river, once described as “a swollen drain,” contrasts sharply with its earlier state as “their river,” filled “with fish in it” and reflecting “the sky and trees” and “the broken yellow moon” (Roy, 1997, pp. 122–124). The narrator further emphasises the impersonal character of the violence through its description of the policemen: “The absence of caprice in what the policemen did. The abyss where anger should have been. The sober, steady brutality, the economy of it all. They were opening a bottle. Or shutting a tap” (Roy, 1997, p. 292). The description of Velutha's killing as “shutting a tap” (Roy, 1997, p. 292). suggests that he acted with a lack of anger and emotion. The violence seems to be orchestrated, ritualistic, and mechanical. Simultaneously, the picture evokes the recurring theme in the novel of water and water flow. The phrase “shut a tap” has a broader meaning, in this context. It links the violence towards Velutha with the novel's imagery of limited and polluted water, implying in addition to the punishment of caste transgression, that his life was violently disrupted by the water throughout the novel, which was a symbol of movement, desire, and the river.

AMMU, GENDER, AND THE ECOLOGY OF SHAME

Caste pollution in the novel is never experienced by Velutha alone rather it is spread to Ammu, whose transgression is met by a parallel vocabulary of shame, which Roy is continually invoking in space and environment. And as the narrator points out in the beginning of the novel, it wasn't what lies at the end of the road that frightens Ammu more than the road itself: “It wasn't what lay at the end of her road that frightened Ammu as much as the nature of the road itself. No milestones marked its progress” (Roy, 1997, p. 213). The body, like Velutha's, becomes a place on which the family presents their fear of

boundary violation: Ammu dies, the narrator reports, “in a grimy room in the Bharat Lodge in Alleppey ... she died alone ... Not old, not young, but a viable, die-able age” (Roy, 1997, p. 161).

The word “grimy” is not incidental. Roy repeatedly associates dirt, griminess, and stagnation with spaces inhabited by those who violate the Love Laws. The spaces developed along the decaying river, however, are more sanitized and tourist-oriented and are intended for hotel guests who avoid the surrounding area. Pollution thus does not impact on all characters in the same way. The pollution of the river is materially real, but its effects are spatially distant and contained by the privileged, and those who are already contaminated by the social pollution are the ones who are most directly affected by the river in this way. For Velutha it is the caste affiliation, for Ammu the gender and transgressive desire. Roy thus associates ecological decline with social exclusion, demonstrating the ways in which pollution gets ‘glued’ to bodies and identities whose agency to be excluded is the least. The argument strengthens Guru’s (2012) finding that in caste society there is a process of humiliation wherein responsibility for the contamination is transferred onto the weakest element in the society to resist the tag irrespective of who actually caused the contamination.

In addition, a reading of Ammu’s story with Velutha’s adds context to the reason why Ammu repeatedly visits the river when she is an adult and why the twins Rahel and Estha return to it. Their return is not a matter of simple ‘nostalgia’, but an attempt to re-enter a space that once offered them a chance to escape from a caste-gendered home and is twice denied to them: by the death of Velutha and Ammu’s exile, and by the material decay of the river. The loss of the Meenachal and the people in it is therefore a twin tragedy, as the novel’s caste/gender system has brought them down to a “swollen drain” (Roy, 1997, p. 124).

DISCUSSION

The results show that *The God of Small Things* (1997) is a precursor to an explicit theory of environmental justice, which posits that pollution is not randomly spread across society, but is instead concentrated on communities that suffer from caste oppression (Nixon, 2011; Huggan and Tiffin, 2010). Roy’s accomplishment is to represent this correspondence as a story, a narrative, and a prose style, and not as an argument; caste violence and ecological violence are described in parallel overlapping “registers” (scent, touch, defiledness) and the reader feels the two as one, reinforcing each other, rather than as separate social ills. This study is an extension of the existing criticism that focuses on the novel’s caste issue (Utami, 2008; Ainie et al., 2013), which also asserts that the novel’s failure to treat untouchability as a social-relational category is to regard it as another ecological one, the body of the Paravan is regarded as source of contamination in the same register in which the novel reads industrial effluent. It also extends ecofeminist and ecocritical readings of Roy (Reddy and Rao, 2025; Mukherjee, 2010), which focus on waste as opposed to gender or nature in general as the central category of analysis that connects caste hierarchy to the ecological harm. While Douglas’s (1966, p. 35) framework provides an abstract account of purity and pollution, Roy’s novel shows a specific literary study of how this cultural logic operates through the river and the social order of a village in postcolonial Kerala. The recurring image of “shutting a tap” (Roy, 1997, p. 292) as a description of lethal police violence is, this article argues, the novel’s most condensed statement of its central claim: that caste discipline and hydraulic, infrastructural control operate, in the world of the text, as versions of the same administrative response.

Another one of these is the temporality of the harm in the novel. The river's pollution is not like Velutha's death, however, because it happens slowly and out of sight, Nixon (2011) notes, and thus does not create a moment of narrative crisis. This imbalance between the spectacular violence of caste and the slow violence of ecology is significant; it implies that Roy is aware of the society's sensibility to the violation of transgressive love, but not so much to the violation of shared natural resources, which is more temporally diffuse. The analysis above also leads to an understanding of the theory of "waste" in postcolonial ecocriticism in general. In a caste society, much ecocritical scholarship treats waste as an index of industrial modernity's environmental costs, but Roy's novel presents that waste is assigned and isn't just a by-product. Like the waste discharge of the factory which is allowed to flow towards the river instead of away from privileged spaces, caste ideology actively renders certain bodies as "waste," Velutha's; certain forms of desire as "waste," Ammu's; and their removal from the body of the social order as "pure," as purification rather than "violence." This reframing would have us consider not just what waste is, but who gets to decide what is waste, with this research pursuing the trail of common words that link the river's waste to Velutha's body and Ammu's exile, thereby answering the question by Roy's novel.

IMPLICATIONS TO RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

According to this study, postcolonial ecocritical analysis of South Asian fiction would be greatly aided by a renewed focus on the analytical category of caste, which is distinct from, but closely associated with, class and gender. Future critics of Indian environmental fiction could ask whether nature is represented, as also who is being represented as its guardian, its polluter, and its victim, as the question has been raised in this paper in the particular context of Roy's novel and its characters of Velutha and the Meenachal. In terms of teaching environmental humanities, the novel presents a novel case to illustrate the concept of 'slow violence' in a context that is not of the West, and which is drawn from the caste-based violence of India (Iheka, 2015, p. 8). Passages from the river analysed here could usefully be juxtaposed with the beating of Velutha to demonstrate for students the possibility for spectacular and slow violence to occur in the same single social logic.

From a contemporary perspective on environmental justice practice and policy, the novel's focus on the historical intertwinement of caste and pollution provides literary complement to the empirical studies, which have confirmed in recent years that the Dalit and other marginalised communities are disproportionately exposed to water pollution, sanitation labour and industrial effluent in present-day India (Guru, 2009: p. 12). The literature from the field of sociology suggests that literary analysis and policy research on environmental justice can be mutually illuminating; that is, that the dynamics can be described from both a psychological and structural perspective in a work of fiction, while it can be described from a statistical perspective in a policy document.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that *The God of Small Things* (1997) addresses issues of caste hierarchy and environmental degradation as an integrated, an interconnected system rather than a series of thematic issues. The study shows how Roy's novel tells the story of pollution of land and water in the same language as the social pollution ascribed to Untouchable bodies, thereby creating a structural interconnection of the death of Velutha's body and the death of the river, Meenachal. Reading the novel with the lens of Douglas's (1966) purity and pollution model, Nixon's (2011) slow violence, and

postcolonial ecocriticism illuminates the novel as an early literary case study of environmental injustice by caste, and of the chilling “slow violence” that is the closing of a tap and the closing of a life in Roy’s world.

More broadly, the long-term critical and popular value of *The God of Small Things* (1997) is that it does not allow one to feel the violence of caste and the damage of the ecology as two different modes of feeling, one political, the other elegiac. Roy’s work blends their images with their syntax, making it hard to feel sorrow for the Meenachal without feeling it for Velutha, and hard to feel the sorrow for Velutha without feeling the sorrow for the river that saw him, absorbed him, and ultimately failed to protect him or the children who loved him.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Further comparative research could explore the nature of caste-based assigned work and the ecological damage that happens, and see if Roy’s model of parallel human and environmental degradation is repeated in other novels by writers from South Asia, such as Mulk Raj Anand, Bama or Perumal Murugan. Interdisciplinary studies of environmental sociology and literary analysis could also explore whether the caste-pollution correspondence Roy fictionalises in his novels occurs in the realities of access to water, sanitation labour, and siting of industries in Kerala and other Indian states, as empirical evidence would suggest. Lastly, further studies could explore Roy’s own nonfiction environmental and caste work, such as her introduction to Ambedkar’s *Annihilation of Caste* and her essays on the Narmada dam movement, alongside her reading of the ecological politics of her fiction, as an archive to read with her work (Roy, 2017)).

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