

**Silent Witness and Suffering Waters:  
Environmental and Cultural Trans-  
formations along the Meenachal  
River in Arundhati Roy's *The God of  
Small Things***

**Harjot Banga**

**Introduction**

In India, the landscape and its constituent elements hold profound religious significance, being venerated and revered as corporeal manifestations of a transcendental and imperceptible divine realm. Within this intricate tapestry of spiritual beliefs, a multitude of associations and symbolic connections are meticulously woven into the fabric of Indian culture, revealing the intrinsic relation-

ship between the terrestrial world and the metaphysical. A remarkable facet of this symbolic interplay is the profound connection between various animals and deities within the Indian pantheon. For instance, the serpent finds its sacred association with Lord Shiva, the god of destruction and transformation, symbolising the cyclical nature of life and death. Conversely, the humble mouse is inextricably linked with Ganesha, the elephant-headed deity renowned as the remover of obstacles and the patron of intellect. Moreover, the regal lion is emblematic of the formidable goddess Parvati, epitomising her fierce and protective nature as she combats evil forces. However, it is not solely the animal kingdom that exemplifies this spiritual symbolism. Rivers, coursing through the subcontinent's terrain, are also elevated to the status of the sacred. These bodies of water are accorded the divine honour of bearing feminine names, reflecting the nurturing and life-giving qualities they embody. Amongst these revered rivers, the Ganga stands as the most illustrious and iconic. For millennia, the Ganga has been revered as the holy conduit that seamlessly bridges the realms of the earthly and the divine, bestowing spiritual purification upon those who immerse themselves in its sacred waters. In this way, it transcends its physical existence to symbolise the profound connection between the mortal realm and the transcendent spiritual reality, reaffirming its pivotal role within the spiritual and cultural landscape of India. As underlined aptly by Steven Darian in his work, *The Ganges in Myth and History*,

Ganga has played a vital role in Hindu ceremony: in rituals of birth and initiation, of marriage and death. As a goddess, she has moved among the great celestials of Hinduism: at times the child of Brahma, the wife of Shiva, the metaphysical product of Vishnu, or mother to the Vasus and to Karttikeya, god of war (Darian 1978, XV).

The enduring reverence for Nature as a living entity in Indian culture transcends the conventional human-centric viewpoint. Furthermore, Indian mythology and imagery have long imbued Nature with human-like qualities, elevating it beyond a mere backdrop and into the realm of sentient presence. Consequently, Nature not only serves as an environmental canvas but also silently witnesses the unfolding narratives of History and stories. Darian underlines that “even as the face is seen reflected in a mirror, the Soul perceives itself in the stillness of Nature” (Darian 1978, 8). This profound insight underscores the intimate connection between the human soul and the natural world, where Nature acts as a reflective surface, mirroring the essence of the soul in its serene and unadulterated state. In the context of Indian thought, this perspective elevates the natural realm to a higher plane of consciousness, wherein it becomes a repository of collective memories, history, and timeless stories.

The cultural perspective in India regards Nature as a sentient entity, shaped by mythology and symbolism.

This viewpoint enriches ecological discourse and underscores the profound interconnectedness between humans and the natural world. Nature, as a silent yet profound witness, embodies a repository of experiences, memories, and spiritual reflections integral to India's rich heritage. However, this indigenous human connection with Nature faced significant disruptions in history. The advent of machinery marked the initial compromise of this connection, while subsequent obliteration was orchestrated by colonisers, inspired by the European adage "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters." In the specific context of this paper, focused on India, we turn our attention to the British Empire, operating through the East India Company, which implemented strategies to exploit natural resources and labour. It is imperative to note that this exploitation failed to generate wealth for local regions but rather established subsistence economies. Resources were undervalued until further up the supply chain, serving primarily the profit-driven interests of corporations involved in their extraction, as articulated by Castellino.

This exploitation does not generate wealth for the areas, but creates subsistence economies where the extracted resource was not valued until much higher up in the supply chain, and then only to generate profits for the corporations that exploit it (Castellino 2020, 584).

Furthermore, the author highlights the instrumental role of legal frameworks in establishing sovereignty for the purpose of systematic resource extraction—an approach closely aligned with British colonisation in India, where similar mechanisms were employed to advance colonial interests and economic exploitation (Castellino 2020, 583-585).

Following this introduction, the subsequent discussion in this paper is dedicated to a focused exploration of the river Meenachal's active role and its eventual demise within the well-known literary work *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy. This paper particularly underscores the river's profound significance as an anti-colonial symbol in the narrative, serving as a silent witness to both a tragic death and a transgressive love story. Additionally, this study will demonstrate the strong connection between humans and non-humans throughout the narrative. To substantiate the central thesis, this analysis employs the perspective of material ecocriticism, a critical framework that ascribes agency and significance to inanimate entities.

### **The epistemological challenge: western and indigenous knowledge perspectives**

Within Indian culture, inanimate entities transcend their inert existence, taking on the semblance of living bodies. This distinctive worldview prompts a reevaluation of

conventional paradigms rooted in rational and scientific observation, ushering in a broader perspective marked by the intrinsic vitality that permeates these objects. In this cultural framework, the boundaries between the living and the non-living dissolve, fostering profound interconnectedness that challenges the limitations of empirical analysis. In their work, *Material Ecocriticism*, Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann stress that

...all matter, in other words, is a ‘storied matter.’ It is a material ‘mesh’ of meanings, properties, and processes, in which human and nonhuman players are interlocked in networks that produce undeniable signifying forces (2014, 1 and 2).

This perspective invites contemplation of existence beyond mere materiality and encourages exploration of the profound vitality imbued within, enriching our comprehension of the world and our role within it. Indeed, delving into the epistemological dimension becomes imperative for a meaningful exploration. Here, a comparative analysis between Western scientific knowledge and indigenous knowledge, particularly within the Indian context, emerges as a pivotal avenue for a more profound grasp of the non-Eurocentric perspective.

Indigenous knowledge, as elucidated by Mistry (2009, 371), is characterised by its remarkable qualities: it is context-specific, collective, holistic, and adaptable. In

sharp contrast, Western knowledge finds its foundation in rationality and science, with an unwavering commitment to objectivity. Indigenous knowledge is rooted in the profound essence of *'knowing how,'* a fundamental departure from the Western knowledge paradigm that predominantly revolves around *'knowledge of'* or *'knowledge about.'* This fundamental difference not only underscores the unique nature of indigenous knowledge but also highlights its transmission across generations. It is conveyed through various captivating forms of oral traditions, among which "local songs, stories, and other performance traditions" (Ross et al. 2011, 32) hold a prominent place. This method of knowledge transmission serves as a powerful vessel, preserving the enduring interconnection that exists between humanity and the non-human world. It also nourishes the deep spiritual ties between the earthly and the spiritual realms. In this indigenous epistemology, dreams and non-replicable communications from the ancestors are judged to be intensely meaningful; deep connections to specific landscapes and people are judged to be more important than relationships or understandings of the land in general (Ross et al. 2011, 52).

This profound perspective encapsulates the essence of indigenous knowledge, where the intimate bonds with the land, the ancestors, and the spiritual realm take precedence over generalised relationships or abstract understandings of the natural world.

It becomes evident that the non-human world possesses its inherent vitality, thereby warranting equitable treatment. To achieve this, it is imperative to grant agency to the non-human entities. Indeed, as articulated by Serenella and Oppermann, contemporary perspectives acknowledge that “things and nonhumans in general are no longer seen as mere objects, statically dependent on a subject, but as ‘full-fledged actors’” (2014, 4). This paradigm shift reflects a growing awareness of the dynamic and participatory role that non-human entities play in shaping our living world: “The world’s vibrant materiality appears as a “web teeming with meanings” [...], in which humans, nonhumans, and their stories are tied together” (Serenella and Oppermann 2014, 5). Hence, the adoption of the material ecocriticism approach becomes essential for a more nuanced analysis of literary texts, in this case, that of *The God of Small Things*. In this context, it is pertinent to provide a concise definition of material ecocriticism:

Material ecocriticism, within this expansive framework, encompasses the examination of how material entities such as bodies, objects, elements, hazardous substances, chemicals, organic and inorganic matter, landscapes, and biological entities interact among themselves and with the human dimension. These interactions engender complex configurations of meanings and discourses that can be interpreted as narratives (Serenella and Oppermann 2014, 7).



This “nonanthropocentric approach” (Serenella and Oppermann 2014, 2), as a critical perspective, engages in a comprehensive exploration of matter, encompassing its dual existence within textual narratives and as a self-contained text in its own right. It seeks to delve deeply into the intricate and dynamic relationship between embodied natural elements and the discursive forces that shape their interaction. Whether manifested through representations within literary works or realised in the tangible realm of concrete reality, the nonanthropocentric approach endeavours to unveil the multifaceted ways in which these elements converge and engage with one another. It offers a profound examination of how the tangible and the textual, the corporeal and the linguistic, intertwine to construct a broader narrative of our relationship with the environment and the natural world, transcending anthropocentric perspectives (Serenella and Oppermann 2014, 7).

**The gradual demise of the River Meenachal in *The God of Small Things***

In light of the preceding discussions, where a nonanthropocentric approach is applied to explore the interplay between materiality, narrative, and nature, it is essential to substantiate this theoretical framework. To achieve this, Arundhati Roy’s renowned novel, *The God of Small Things*, published and winner of the Booker Prize in 1997, will serve as a pertinent and illustrative reference

point. Within the pages of this famous work, the gradual decline of nature, specifically of the river Meenachal, unfolds as a direct consequence of the events occurring within the Ipe family and, concurrently, as an indirect result of historical events inexorably tied to the legacy of colonialism.

The narrative of the twins' family, Rahel and Esther, predominantly unfolds within the confines of the village of Ayemenem, situated in the state of Kerala. Notably, the early years of these siblings transpire in close proximity to the Meenachal River, which flows adjacent to their residence. Similarly, the life story of their mother, Ammu, a divorced woman residing in her paternal home, is intricately interwoven with the presence of this river. It bears witness to the poignant love affair between her and Velutha, an untouchable Paravan. The Meenachal River thus assumes a central and symbolic role in shaping the lives and experiences of these characters, symbolising a profound connection between human existence and the natural world. *The God of Small Things* bears a resemblance to Patrick White's unfinished novel, *The Hanging Garden*, where Eirene Sklavos and Gilbert Horsfall, two children, seek refuge in a garden during the tumultuous backdrop of the Second World War. Similarly, in Arundhati Roy's narrative, the twins and their mother find sanctuary by the Meenachal River, a haven from the complexities and turmoil within their patriarchal and chauvinist family dynamics. Indeed, the area

surrounding the river serves as a metaphorical garden, or better a garden-river—a space wherein societal norms and constraints need not hold sway. This setting epitomises a period when, as Roy (1997) vividly articulates, “the unthinkable became thinkable and the impossible really happened” (31). It is within this realm that the concept of the Love Laws is introduced—a set of regulations dictating whom one should love, how to love, and to what extent. However, it becomes evident that these laws, despite their apparent practicality, are subject to the complexities of a world that often defies such rigid prescriptions (Roy 1997, 33). Indeed, Doris B. Wallace, in her astute observation, accentuates the significance of the garden as a haven:

Perhaps it is the freedom to be as one is, not as one ‘should’ be, that makes the garden and its privacy so important. For children, the natural world is free from the adults of the world and the demands they impose (Wallace 1988, 144).

Here, within the garden’s embrace, a child can revel in unrestrained liberty, nurturing their imagination devoid of the incessant vigilance of parents and free from the constraints of conformity. This space represents a world apart from the home, meticulously constructed and dominated by adults, where every facet is subjected to their authority.

In this context, the river assumes the role of an instructive nurturer, silently imparting to the twins the indispensable indigenous wisdom required for survival in their village life. It serves as an unconventional yet effective teacher, guiding them through invaluable lessons. Within its tranquil depths, the twins encounter the unspoken pleasures of underwater foraging, discovering essential sustenance. They gain proficiency in the art of fishing, learning to thread sinuous purple earthworms onto hooks adorning fishing rods expertly crafted by Velutha, employing slender culms of yellow bamboo. The river becomes a realm where they become adept in the language of Silence, a skill akin to that of the Fisher People's offspring, as they acquaint themselves with the vibrant dialect of dragonflies. Here, they cultivate the virtues of patience, observation, and introspection, a capacity to formulate thoughts without verbalising them. They also hone their agility, swiftly reacting when the pliant yellow bamboo bows downward (Roy 1997, 203). Their understanding of the river's geography is cultivated through experiential learning, a concept akin to Heidegger's notion of *Erlebnis*, or lived experience (Väyrynen 2021, 90). Their knowledge of the river's course can be summarised as follows:

So this first third of the river they knew well. The next two-thirds less so. The second third was where the Really Deep began. Where the current was swift and certain (downstream when the tide was out, up-

stream, pushing up from the backwaters when the tide was in). The third third was shallow again. The water brown and murky. Full of weeds and darting eels and slow mud that oozed through toes like toothpaste. The twins could swim like seals and, supervised by Chacko, had crossed the river several times, returning panting and cross-eyed from the effort, with a stone, a twig or a leaf from the Other Side as testimony to their feat. But the middle of a respectable river, or the Other Side, was no place for children to Linger, Loll or Learn Things. Estha and Rahel accorded the second third and the third third of the Meenachal the deference it deserved. Still, swimming across was not the problem. Taking the boat with Things in it (so that they could Prepare to prepare to be prepared) was” (Roy 1997, 203-204).

If we envision the landscape of Ayemenem village from an aerial perspective, a discernible division emerges, demarcated by the presence of the river. On one side of this watercourse lies the familial residence, while on the opposing bank stands the History House—a dwelling steeped in profound symbolism, epitomising the enduring legacy of colonialism and the historical atrocities it embodies. This interpretation aligns with Estha and Rahel’s perception, as detailed by Roy (1997), that the house Chacko referred to was located on the other side of the river, within the abandoned rubber estate. This house was associated with Kari Saibu, known as the Black Sahib—a figure who had “gone native,” adopting

Malayalam language and mundus, and eventually met a tragic end through suicide. This property became embroiled in lengthy legal disputes after the suicide, but the twins, despite not having visited it, could vividly envision the History House, Ayemenem's equivalent of Kurtz's Heart of Darkness. It was a place shrouded in mystery, having lain empty for years, with few having laid eyes on it. It encapsulated the essence of the historical narrative (Roy 1997, 52 and 53).

An air of danger pervades both sides of the river and within its waters, with neither bank providing absolute security. However, it is in the area around the river or within the river's waters themselves that a semblance of safety can be found. On either bank of the river, the spectre of oppression looms, compelling the innocent souls—namely, the twins and their mother—to seek refuge. In this context, the river, while embodying a nurturing maternal aspect, assumes a maternal fate itself, destined for an inevitable demise catalysed by two pivotal events: the tragic passing of Sophie Mol on one hand, and the illicit love affair between Ammu and Velutha on the other. These two events set the stage for, on the one hand, the expulsion from the garden-river, and on the other hand, culminate in the arrest and subsequent death of Velutha at the hands of the police force. This intricate relationship between the river and the human drama it bears witness to aligns with Sofia Cavalcanti's conceptualization. Drawing upon the insights of Marie Louise

Pratt, Cavalcanti characterises the locale surrounding the river, as well as the river itself, as a “contact zone” (Cavalcanti 2021, 56). This term designates a space where geographically and historically distinct groups converge, establishing sustained interrelations with one another. In essence, it signifies a dynamic nexus where the boundaries of separation are transcended, fostering complex interactions and enduring connections (Cavalcanti 2021, 56). This contact zone serves as the juncture where the Western and Eastern worlds converge, where the touchable and the untouchable intersect. The river assumes a profound significance, embodying primordial vitality and silently bearing witness to the chronicles of History and stories—a presence that predates the arrival of the white colonisers, or the *white* sahibs. It possesses a sacred essence, yet it is also touchable in a sacred manner. From a broader perspective, the river within the landscape adopts the form of a snake, a protective serpent that, unlike its venomous counterparts, cradles its children, akin to a mother’s nurturing embrace, when they approach or immerse themselves in its waters. However, this maternal guardian, this protective snake, is fated for demise as mentioned before. Its impending fate is inextricably intertwined with the narrative’s central themes.

### **Sophie Mol’s death: the erosion of imperialist and colonizing perspectives**

The narrative unfolds with the inaugural event that strains the rapport between humanity, represented by

the Ipe twins, and the natural world, embodied by the Meenachal river. Estha and Rahel, the Ipe twins, are ‘dizygotic’ twins, arising from separate yet synchronously fertilized eggs, with Estha being the elder by eighteen minutes (Roy 1997, 2). Their parentage arises from a dissolved marital union: Baba, their father, is a businessman, while Ammu, their mother, embarks on a forbidden romance with Velutha, an untouchable, following her divorce from her husband. It is against this backdrop that the twins encounter their half-English, half-Indian cousin, Sophie Mol, the daughter of Chacko and Margaret Kochamma, upon her arrival in India. The introduction of Sophie Mol into this intricate familial web adds layers of complexity to the evolving dynamics, marking a significant juncture where human relationships and nature converge. She employs imperial and discriminatory language towards the twins, her cousins: “You’re both whole wogs and I’m a half one” (Roy 1997, 16). The way she talks represents the manifestation of her own internalised racism and self-hatred. By employing the derogatory term “wog,” she seeks to demean and dehumanise them. Furthermore, her character embodies multiple dimensions within the narrative, representing the white, the different, the anti-colonial, and anti-indigenous perspectives. She serves as a poignant symbol of the enduring legacy of British colonialism in India. Her worldview is profoundly influenced by the racist and paternalistic attitudes prevalent among the British colonialists. Being a mixed-race baby girl, Mol occupies a complex social position characterised by privilege and oppression. On



the one hand, her whiteness affords her a higher social status compared to the Indian characters in *The God of Small Things*. On the other hand, her illegitimacy marks her as an outcast within both the white and Indian communities, exemplifying the intricate interplay of identity and discrimination in the colonial context. She embodies the role of “the uneasy inheritor of an imperialist discourse that threatens to proscribe their own distinctive hybridizing experience of India in all its rich and unruly complexity” (Tickell 2020, 10). Her character encapsulates the complex tension between her inherited imperialist worldview and the intricate, multifaceted reality of India’s cultural fusion.

Sophie Mol’s exclusion is further exemplified when she accepts her cousins’ invitation for a river excursion in a small boat, which tragically capsizes, resulting in her drowning. Initially, she perceives the surrounding nature as unfamiliar, alienating, and primarily estranging: “Sophie Mol was more tentative. A little frightened of what lurked in the shadows around her” (Roy 1997, 291). These words bear a resemblance to those spoken by Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*, a novel by Joseph Conrad, as both Marlow and Sophie Mol find themselves on a vessel in unfamiliar territories, each grappling with their own distinct challenges and encountering the complexities of the landscapes they navigate. In this critical moment, the river assumes an anti-colonial role, metaphorically “biting” or resisting the imposition of the colonial vision upon the pre-existing landscape. However, the native and indigenous, as represented by the Ipe twins, re-

tains its essential humanity and innocence, as they go to great lengths to rescue their young cousin from the perilous waters: “It was four in the morning, still dark, when the twins, exhausted, distraught and covered in mud, made their way through the swamp and approached the History House” (Roy 1997, 293). This poignant episode stresses the resilience and compassion of the indigenous characters in the face of adversity and tragedy, contrasting with the oppressive colonial presence. Furthermore, if we examine the predicament of Sophie Mol’s biological mother, Margaret Kochamma, who endured the loss of her husband, Joe, she embarked on a journey to India in search of solace but found herself bereft of everything, including her cherished daughter. “She had come to Ayemenem to heal her wounded world, and had lost all of it instead. She shattered like glass” (Roy 1997, 263). Yet, it becomes evident that contemporary India can no longer offer the same assurances of wonder and happiness as it did during the era of imperial British rule. The stark contrast between the colonial perception of India as a place of wonder and fulfilment and the challenges faced by individuals like Margaret underscores the shifting dynamics and complexities of the modern Indian landscape.

### **The forbidden love between Ammu, a touchable, and Velutha, an untouchable**

The second episode delves into the ostensibly “impossible” love affair between Ammu and Velutha, a relationship deemed unlawful according to the moral and soci-

etal code deeply ingrained in Indian culture. This code finds its roots in the *Manusmriti*, or *Laws of Manu*, which, despite contradicting most of the principles enshrined in the Indian constitution, continues to influence and shape the conduct of many individuals across India. The ill-fated lovers, Ammu and Velutha, become victims of this code, both at the familial and societal levels. However, it is noteworthy that, on a legal front, only Velutha faces punishment due to a fabricated lie orchestrated by Baby Kochamma and Mammachi and conveyed to Inspector Thomas Mathew.

Velutha faced persistent discrimination due to the caste disparity, a poignant irony as his name, “Velutha,” meaning “White” in Malayalam, starkly contrasted with his actual dark complexion. This discrimination was deeply rooted in his caste identity, as his father, Vellya Paapen, belonged to the Paravan community (Roy 1997, 73). From a young age, Velutha began labouring at the “Paradise Pickles & Preserves” factory, which was overseen by the Ipe family. Their interactions were relegated to the back entrance of the Ayemenem House, where they delivered coconuts harvested from the estate’s trees. The Ipe family, like much of the society at the time, harboured a deep-seated prejudice against Paravans, and they were prohibited from entering the house or touching anything that had come into contact with the Touchables, including Caste Hindus and Caste Christians. Mammachi, recalling her own girlhood, recounted the

extreme segregation enforced during that era: Paravans were once expected to move in reverse, using a broom to erase their footprints to ensure that Brahmins or Syrian Christians did not inadvertently defile themselves by stepping into a Paravan's footprint. These oppressive norms dictated that Paravans, like other Untouchables, were not allowed on public roads, could not cover their upper bodies, and were forbidden from carrying umbrellas. Even when they spoke, they had to shield their mouths, redirecting their breath away from those they addressed (Roy 1997, 73 and 74). This historical account underscores the profound systemic discrimination faced by individuals from marginalised communities during that time.

Despite the prevailing discrimination, Ammu found herself captivated by Velutha's physique, integrating him as an integral element in her dreams. She envisioned the contours of Velutha's abdomen, the muscular ridges, becoming taut and rising beneath his skin, resembling the divisions on a slab of chocolate (Roy 1997, 175 and 215). As time elapsed, their clandestine meetings continued to unfold. Particularly noteworthy is the culmination of their love story in the final chapter of the novel, 'The Cost of Living', where their union transpires along the banks of the Meenachal garden-river, illuminated by the moonlight. This pivotal moment unfolds with the river and some other natural elements, such as the weeping bamboo tree, as silent witnesses (Roy 1997, 335), mark-

ing the profound crossing of the boundary separating the touchable and the untouchable. The resulting union carries an air of serenity and, simultaneously, an overwhelming sense of awe (Roy 1997, 337).

They stood there. Skin to skin. Her brownness against his blackness. Her softness against his hardness. Her nut-brown breasts (that wouldn't support a toothbrush) against his smooth ebony chest. She smelled the river on him (Roy 1997, 334 and 335).

This climactic scene symbolises the defiance of societal norms and the profound connection between Ammu and Velutha.

In addition to the various natural elements, Velutha's own father, Vellya Paapen, inadvertently becomes a witness to "Every night. Rocking on the water. Empty. Waiting for the lovers to return" (Roy 1997, 256). In his inebriated state, he discloses these nightly occurrences to Mammachi and Baby Kochamma, who exploit this information to concoct baseless allegations against Velutha. These fabricated charges result in Velutha being wrongly accused of the alleged rape of Ammu, leading to his arrest by the police. Tragically, Velutha falls victim to brutal beatings within the confines of the History House, ultimately succumbing to his injuries. After Velutha's tragic death, Estha is compelled to depart for Madras by the Madras Mail train, joining his father.

## **The death of the River Meenachal**

These pivotal events entail departures that herald significant transformations: Velutha's tragic demise, Estha's journey to reunite with his father, Rahel's relocation to the United States of America, and Ammu's solitary existence. These departures instigate profound alterations within the landscape, particularly along the banks of the Meenachal River. While these characters inhabited the idyllic garden-river, the river itself flowed in harmonious accord with its natural surroundings. However, as they depart, the tranquil environment gradually succumbs to the encroachment of artificial and estranging influences. This shift becomes strikingly evident when the twins revisit their childhood village of Ayemenem and embark on nostalgic walks through the landscapes of their youth. Both of them discern a desolate landscape, marked by the river's plight as it bears the consequences of human actions.

Estha's exploration of the river reveals a grim transformation, where the once-vibrant waterway now languishes in a state of deterioration, tainted by the odious presence of pesticides and devoid of its once-thriving fish population. In this altered landscape, the river's waters have lost their former vitality and charm, transforming into a desolate and contaminated environment. As Estha traverses the riverbanks, he encounters the acrid scent of waste and chemicals procured through World Bank

loans, witnessing firsthand the devastating impact of human intervention on the natural world. The surviving fish bear the scars of fin-rot and painful boils, emblematic of the river's decline. Alongside this environmental degradation, Estha's passage also encompasses a journey through the changing social and economic dynamics of the region, as exemplified by the juxtaposition of newly constructed, ostentatious houses fueled by Gulf money and the older, envious residences clinging to their private domains (Roy 1997, 13 and 15). These shifts reflect the broader transformation of the landscape, from a once-thriving ecosystem intertwined with human lives and experiences to a deteriorating, almost alien terrain that mirrors the disintegration of cherished memories and connections.

Years later, when Rahel revisits the Meenachal River, she encounters a dismal transformation too. Downriver, a saltwater barrage, a political compromise brokered for the benefit of influential paddy farmers, has altered the river's fate. This barrage now regulates the inflow of saltwater from the backwaters, enabling two rice harvests per year but at a significant cost to the river's vitality. Once a grand and imposing presence, the river has dwindled into a feeble semblance of its former self—a meagre, swollen drain, its thin, sluggish waters listlessly brushing against muddy banks, occasionally revealing lifeless fish beneath its surface. A suffocating weed has ensnared its waters, with brown roots resembling under-

water tendrils. Bronze-winged lily-trotters cautiously traverse its surface. The river, once an imposing force capable of shaping destinies, has lost its vigour and become a stagnant, green expanse burdened with foul debris destined for the sea (Roy 1997, 124-126). Furthermore, swimming in the once-inviting waters of the Meenachal River had become a distant memory as children would defecate at its edge, their waste left on the muddy riverbed. In the evening, the river carried away their offerings, leaving a scummy residue. Upstream, people washed in clean water, but downstream, the smell of waste hung over Ayemenem. Therefore, “*No Swimming* signs had been put up in stylish calligraphy” (Roy 1997, 125). The once-feared river is now a mere shadow of its former self. Hence, one can assert that the Meenachal River and its ecosystem have undergone a definitive demise. In effect, the twins no longer encounter the serenity of their childhood but are met with a landscape characterised by aridity and desolation.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the Meenachal River serves as a poignant symbol of interconnectedness between human narratives and the natural world, exemplifying a profound and intricate relationship. Through the lens of the river, we witness the unfolding of human stories, most notably the tragic demise of Sophie Mol and the forbidden love shared between Ammu and Velutha. These narratives are



intrinsically woven into the river's own journey, reflecting how human and non-human stories are inextricably entangled. The river, once teeming with life and vitality, undergoes a profound transformation, mirroring the shifts in the lives of those it touches. Its gradual death signifies a broader ecological and cultural decay, illustrating the far-reaching consequences of human actions on the natural world. In conclusion, we have to say that the Meenachal River's demise is emblematic of the intricate web of existence, where the fates of both human and non-human entities are intricately intertwined, echoing the profound interconnectedness of all life.

## Works Cited

- Castellino, Joshua. 2020. "Colonial Crime, Environmental Destruction and Indigenous Peoples: A Roadmap to Accountability and Protection." In *Colonial Wrongs and Access to International Law*, edited by Bergsmo Morten, Kaleck Wolfgang, and Yin Hlaing Kyaw, 577-602. Brussels: Torkel Opsahl Academic EPublisher.
- Cavalcanti, Sofia. 2021. "The Meenachal River as Vital Materiality in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*." *MediAzioni*, no 30: A49-A69, <http://www.mediazioni.sitlec.unibo.it/>. University of Bologna.
- Darian, Steven G. 1978. *The Ganges in Myth and History*. Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii.
- Dehejia, Divya. 2007. "Recognizing the Gods." Columbia University (Department of Art History and Archaeology). Last accessed on October 10, 2023 at 20:38 (Italy). [https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/gods/hd\\_gods.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/gods/hd_gods.htm)
- Iovino, Serenella, and Serpil Oppermann. 2014. *New Ecocriticism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Mistry, J. 2009. "Indigenous Peoples." *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*. Amsterdam: Elsevier BV (1st edition).

Ross, Anne, Kathleen Pickering Sherman, Snodgrass, Jeffrey G., Delcore, Henry D. and Sherman, Richard. 2011. *Indigenous Peoples and the Collaborative Stewardship of Nature*. New York: Routledge.

Roy, Arundhati. 1997. *The God of Small Things*. London: HarperCollins Publisher.

Tickell, Alex. 2020. "Postcolonial Fiction and the Question of Influence: Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things* and *Rumer Godden*." *Postcolonial Text*. 15, no. 1: 1-20.

Väyrynen, Kari. 2021. "History Culture of Living Experience (Erlebnis): Dangers and Possibilities for Historiography in the Era of 'Experience Society' (Erlebnissgesellschaft)." *NUMERO*, no. 52 History Culture (Special Issue): 89-102.

Wallace, Doris B. 1988. "Secret Gardens and Other Symbols of Gender in Literature." *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity* 3, no. 1: 135-145.