

A Comparative Study of Namita Gokhale and Arundhati Roy: Intersecting Oppressions in *The God of Small Things* and *Things to Leave Behind* through the Prism of Ecofeminism

J. S. Jehu Raju^{1*}, Prof. V.B. Chitra²

^{*1} Research Scholar in English, Jawaharlal Nehru Technological University

² Professor of English & Head, Jawaharlal Nehru Technological University, Anantapur

Corresponding Author: J. S. Jehu Raju (Research Scholar in English, Jawaharlal Nehru Technological University)

Article History: Received: 16/10/2025., Accepted: 23/11/2025., Published: 02/12/2025

Abstract: This research delves into the themes of oppression, gender, and the environment in Arundhati Roy's first book, *The God of Small Things* (1997), and Namita Gokhale's historical epic, *Things to Leave Behind* (2016), in a comparative approach. Using the Ecofeminist framework, this research attempts to show how the exploitation of women and nature, within the postcolonial Indian framework, is interlinked and is a result of a particular form of patriarchy. The research investigates the intersectionality of oppression through the female characters and protagonists, Ammu in Roy's novel and Tilottama/Kavita in Gokhale's, as they navigate and resist the systems of hierarchy based on gender, class, caste, and traditions. While Roy seeks to explain and critique the social fissures and their numerous ecological implications in a contemporary environment, Gokhale's historical writing reflects the growing ability to resist the imposition of liberal feminism at the cross-purpose of culture, the environment, and the gendered social order in the Kumaon region. Both authors address the imposition of patriarchal structures in their narratives and the related need for social and ecological justice.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Patriarchy, Intersectionality, *The God of Small Things*, *Things to Leave Behind*, Gender Oppression, Social Justice, Liberal Feminism, Caste, Environment.

Cite this article: Raju, J. S. J. & Chitra, V. B. (2025). A Comparative Study of Namita Gokhale and Arundhati Roy: Intersecting Oppressions in *The God of Small Things* and *Things to Leave Behind* through the Prism of Ecofeminism. *MRS Journal of Arts, Humanities and Literature*, 2 (12), 5-8.

Introduction

In Indian English literature today, the field is as wide as ever, and women authors are championing the craft and quickly taking the industry leadership role. Arundhati Roy and Namita Gokhale are also trailblazers as they tackle the major socio-political and inner struggles of the Indian woman. Roy, with her *The God of Small Things* (GOST), won the Booker Prize in 1997 and became an international literary star. It was GOST that made social critique and social class an issue in literature, while Gokhale was an established writer and had to wait 19 years to publish her *Things to Leave Behind* (TTLBH), a historical epic in the tribal zone of Kumaon, that won acclaim for detailing the struggles of women and social class.

This work, too, seeks to take an Ecofeminist lens. Ecofeminism is a paradigm first articulated in 1974 and 'is critical of the intersection of economic exploitation of nature and the social subordination of women. Ecofeminism believes that the exploitation of nature and the subordination of women eman from the same socially and hierarchically constructed patriarchal system of power and domination.' Ecofeminists have also theorized the impact of capitalism, and patriarchal social order as the primary

goals, thus, the oppression of the woman and the degradation of the environment.

An important aspect of this paper, especially in the South Asian context, is intersectionality. Intersectionality argues that race, class, caste, and sexuality influence a woman's relationship with the environment and the roles assigned to her, thus determining the nature of her oppression. Through the comparison of GOST and TTLBH.

Patriarchy, Domination, and the Call for Justice

Exploratory research on the interrelation among the exploitation of women and the ecological crises, highlighting that patriarchal systems which exploit both of them. Such systems unilaterally value the domineering of protective characteristics and are, therefore, the root cause of systemic gender oppression and ecological destruction. In the Indian society, which is hierarchically organized by the systems of caste, inequitable distribution of wealth, and gendered insecurity, the society continues to lack social freedom even though it achieved political freedom. Marginalization of people is socially inflicted on the basis of their wealth, caste, class, religion, and gender.

The key contention within ecofeminism is that the patriarchal systems that restrict the agency of women, controlling them, is similar to the control of nature. On the other hand, women emancipation is in itself, the breakdown of the dual colonization of the western patriarchal dialogue and the social arrangement of the Indian system in which women are relegated to the control. In the case of modern female novelists, this is represented by female characters who are active in the struggle to obtain their rights (as liberal feminists) and become advocates of environmental conservation. Such characters are viewed as countering the patriarchal ideologies which restrict their participation.

Every critique on such system components must delve character intricacies on how class and caste converge to impact their interface with the ecosystem within the Indian framework. The postcolonial period saw the advent of four women novelists within the Indian framework of postcolonial and patriarchal perspectives, revealing the brutal and marginalization of the women of the lower classes. Satirical and ironic discourse as well as rebellion, are techniques to discuss the discourses that are patriarchal and problematic used by Roy and Gokhale differently.

Case Study 1: Intersectionality and Ecological Reflection in Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things

The God of Small Things (GOST) is one of the postmodern Indian fictional works that adopts a feminist critique of the plight of women in Ayemenem for three generations, which is a reflective of the contemporary Ayemenem village. Roy critiques the socio-political structures on the intersections of social class and caste oppression.

Ammu and Interlocking Oppressions

As a female central character, Ammu is the most illustrative case of the intersecting oppressions of a woman breach the socio-cultural "laws of the threshold".

Classes and Gender: Within Ammu's character is a representation of oppression and savage treatment of alevated marriage. members of a society dominated by orthodox ruling patriarchy do not recognize their wives, daughters, and sisters as citizen. Ammu is excluded from participating in higher education due to the prevailing socio-political and ideological framework that's believed to backlash women. Her love marriage ends to an abusive spouse, and after returning to her parental home, where she is only allowed to stay "on Sufferance." Legally and lawfully, Ammu has no right to any of the property from the Ayemenem House, a fact which she has made evident to and has been bitter towards the "Wonderful male chauvinist society." Contrarily, Her brother Chacko, unlike her, enjoys love and esteem and portrays the marital privilege from a male, which is "What yours is mine and what's mine is also mine".

The Subaltern Connection: In the eyes of orthodox ruling patriarchy, her sexual relationship with Velutha, a Dalit, is "wicked, sacrilegious, and sinful," and so, in the intersection of forbidden sexuality, gender, and caste, culminates in the death of Velutha and the ruin of Ammu's life, thus emphasizing how, in a fractured the social order in which we live, the most affected ones are women, children, and other people of lesser status.

Ecofeminist Reflection in Setting and Symbolism

Ammu's opposition to societal norms and the resulting consequences for her reflect the more complex issues of the

environment. The interconnected oppression of women and nature is one of the themes addressed in the novel. In the story, the setting represents the social decay and the decay of the female characters in the story, which is also the oppression of the female characters. The Pachu River is mentioned in the title of the river, and is also a symbol that represents the beauty of the nurturing but also the restriction of society. As much as Ammu is imprisoned in her society that is caste-ridden, the land of Kerala is also imprisoned in the violent ignorance of the natural world, as well as the "laws" of love and existence that, like Ammu, destruct.

Through Roy's use of circling repetitions and coined phrase collocations as a form of writer's block, Roy is able to capture the essence of what is transgressive and construct a novel that is transgressive. Roy's use of experimentation in the form of wordplay that gives rise to black humor in a phrase for the novel, such as the 'Laughter of Small Gods', which helps the reader in some degree of detachment in having to face the fierce emotion of deep misery and helps the reader in some degree of acceptance of the tragic reality that comes with love that has been prescribed with boundaries.

Liberal Feminism and Environmental Change in Namita Gokhale's Things to Leave Behind

Things to Leave Behind are a reflection of Gokhale's concern for women's issues and literature. Gokhale focuses on women's novels from a 1990s viewpoint and argues about women's issues and literature. Namita Gokhale's novels focus on women's issues, especially women's problems of self-identity, self-assertion, freedom, and self-actualization in a patriarchal society. Things to Leave Behind (TTLBH) is a multi-generational historical novel that takes place in Kumaon from 1840 to 1912, and focuses on the complex history of the British-Indian empire and the resistance of Kumaoni women to patriarchal traditions and the influence of colonialism.

Tilottama and the Liberal Feminist Quest

TTLBH is subjected to liberal feminism which believes in the social, political and economic equality of all people, and therefore, advocates for the freedom of women from all forms of oppression. Liberal feminism is concerned with equality in public and private life. Tilottama as the main character demonstrates the liberal feminist ideals of the novel.

The Chains of Domesticity: Domesticity for Tilottama is a life of oppression which begins after marriage. In marriage, she is expected to forget all of her dreams in life and only focus on domestic responsibilities. This reminds us of the feminist issue pointed out by Betty Friedan, which is that, 'There are a large number of women who are imprisoned in the home', and only leave to shop, or go out with their husbands. This view of Tilottama's oppression is supported by her mother in law, who is very traditional and believes that household responsibilities and activities are the only things that are her duties.

Emancipation through Education and Self-Development: The character of Tilottama breaks free from the constraints of domesticity and seeks out educational opportunities, particularly in the fields of English and Mathematics. The rebellious attitude of the character endorsed the feminist ideals of Mary Wollstonecraft. Facing, the character encourages herself: "Don't look back, Tillie, Look forward, to things yet to come. Never return to what has been left behind."

Redefining Gender Roles: The emancipation of Tilottama is not a result of fighting, and instead is a result of gaining self-control and self-improvement. Nain Chand, her husband, encourages her, which aligns with Wollstonecraft's admiration for men that consider women to be equals. Standing above her oppressions, Tilottama shifts her life to a life of her own choice. This completes the vision of Rosemarie Tong of liberal feminism to make a society where both women and men can enjoy the same freedom and self development.

Environmental Stewardship and Urbanization

Although Gokhale is primarily concerned with liberal feminism and the intricacies of personal and intellectual freedom, the novel is clearly within the field of ecofeminism, owing to the outsize cognizance of the Kumaon region and the changes it undergoes. The character Kavita in *Things to Leave Behind* is remembered for 'urbanization's impact on traditional environmental practices.' The novel profoundly illustrates the stunning flora of Kumaon, especially ferns and flowering trees with clouds hovering above, indicating an ecofeminine relation to nature now threatened by the 'fragile modernity' and 'the mixed legacy of the British Indian past.' The protagonist's struggle for freedom plays out against an elemental confusion of caste, creed, and culture. This points to the ecofeminist concern of the intricate community remapping, socially and spatially, that hinges on the environmental exploitation and the traditional community structures, especially the ones women tend to uphold.

Intersecting Oppressions and Narrative Resistance

Despite the differences in setting, time frame, and narrative style, the analysis of GOST and TTLBH in tandem illustrates the thematic concern of patriarchal oppression.

The Characteristics of Subjugation: Caste vs. Culture.

Roy (GOST): Subjugation is structural and immediate. It's due to the violence of caste order and the 'man-made society' of postcolonial Kerala. Ammu's oppression is total; she is viciously victimized and dishonored through her post-mortem cremation. Her storyline reflects the intricate cultural and political boundaries which shape conflict and the antagonistic political economy of a society. The layers of oppression are caste/class (Velutha), gender (Ammu), and the legal (no will).

Gokhale (TTLBH): The oppression is cultural and domestic: the denial of fundamental rights (education included) and domestic violence sanctioned by political-legal customs of a patriarchy. Gokhale's women encounter 'discrimination, sense of insecurity, sexual harassment,' but the struggle reflected in TTLBH is often articulated in the realm of liberal feminism, which posits the quest as the attainment of individual liberty, education, self-development, and self determination (as a fundamental right), not as a direct struggle against a lethal caste order. In this case, the intersectionality is primarily gender, with a domestic, traditional culture/class of the Kumaon region.

Environmental Critique and Intersectionality

The two novels explore environmental critique and environmental intersectionality, focusing on how victims of environmental changes are frequently and disproportionately marginalized.

Protagonists of the Novels and Their Intersectionality (Oppression) and Environmental Reflection

GOST (Roy) Ammu (Modern, urbanized, and economically vulnerable, upper-caste yet marginalized) Gender, Caste/Class. Violence and societal condemnation that doom Ammu also reflect the breakdown of the environment. The Pachu River embodies a complex and governed societal nature.

TTLBH (Gokhale) Tilottama/Kavita (historical, rural, in struggle, educated, autonomous) Gender, Tradition, Class (modernity in contrast to traditional roles). Tilottama's struggle for education and escape from the purdah embodies the static tradition. Kavita's character evokes the power of the Kumaon landscape being transformed, and traverses the impact of urbanization on traditional practices and integrated movement.

Narrative Strategy and Feminist Agency

Gokhale and Roy employ different narrative strategies to depict the tragic (empowered) ends of their female characters.

Roy's Transgression: Roy's style is transgressive, in that the narrative is complex, and nonlinear, and incorporates wordplay (contortionist poetics) that subverts the language and mirrors Ammu's rebellion against patriarchal rules. Roy presents Ammu as a character with 'non-patriarchal sensibility' for her agency subsists in the defiance of the 'Love Laws'.

Gokhale's Liberal Quest: Regarding the Tilottama portion of Gokhale's works, there is trauma associated with the psychological advancement of the self, the self-determination of the self, and the performance of the acts of defiance that Gokhale describes, which acts of defiance encompass, for instance, the pursuit of knowledge and the cessation of domestic bondage, which is the essence of liberal feminism. In the realm of Gokhale's literature, she delineates women that she portrays, in her prose, as "fiercely strong, assertive, and individualistic," in that they are able, in the literature, to actively seek and "claim citizenship in the collective affirmation of womanhood".

In both instances, the works reflect the broader aim of the Indian women writers "to dismantle the shackles and the whole edifice of the Indian social structure of the women" and to inspire and advocate for a disruptive and defiant proposition concerning the feminine psyche.

In conclusion, this comparative study suggests that both Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Namita Gokhale's *Things to Leave Behind* have been purposefully created to function as critiques of the patriarchal system in India and, to a larger extent, uphold the positive tenets of ecofeminism.

In Roy's work, there lies the analytical framework of feminism, as one of the primary objectives inclusive of feminism is the examination of the interplay between systems of oppression, in this case, the marginalization of Ammu and the patriarchal systems that are the bedrock of subdominant caste and class structures and the control and regulation of nature. In her work, Roy creates temporal disjunction to reveal multiple forms of violence and the systemic violence that is wielded with "the control that is derived from the paranoia and ruthlessness of power". Examining one element of the domestic conflict and the process of personal (liberal feminist) self-development through education in the Kumaon region of India, Gokhale's historical narrative offers an important counter to the mainstream interpretations of the genre. The character that Gokhale portrays as one among the numerous victims of urbanization is also concerned with the landscape, thus

anchoring Gokhale's work with the environment and the changing landscape's tenuousness.

All identified as established authors of Indian English Fiction, both Gokhale and Roy have proved that in conjunction with other social problems, literature can serve to publicize and motivate resolve to address urgent issues of the environment. In the Geography of Oppression, Gokhal and Roy lead focus towards the concern of equity among the disenfranchised and the health of the environment. The require for equity outlines the geography of oppression to be inclusive of a stable and sustainable environment.

References

- Ahmed, M. K. "Ecofeminist Tendencies in Virginia Woolf, Doris Lessing and Arundhati Roy." *International Journal of English, Literature and Social Science*, vol. 4, no. 4, 2019, pp. 997–1002.
- Azizah, N., and N. Fitri. "The Representation of Liberal Feminism through the Main Character in 'The Post' Movie." *JELT: Journal of English Language Teaching*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2020, pp. 84–94.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Vintage Random House, 1949.
- Buckingham, S. "Ecofeminism in the Twenty-First Century." *The Geographical Journal*, vol. 170, no. 2, 2004, pp. 146–154.
- Cixous, Hélène. "The Laugh of the Medusa." *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, edited by Eobyn R. Warhol and Diane P. Hendl, Rutgen UP, 1996, pp. 334–349.
- De, Shobhaa. *Snapshots*. Penguin Books, 1995.
- Desmawati, E. "Analysis of Feminism in the Novel of *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott." *Journal of Language and Literature*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2020, pp. 91–96.
- Eidelweis, R. V. P. *Liberal Feminism as Reflected in The Main Character of Joy Movie*. Doctoral dissertation, Diponegoro University, 2018.
- Foley, A. "Fay Weldon, liberal feminism and the praxis of Praxis." *Literator: Journal of Literary Criticism, Comparative Linguistics and Literary Studies*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2007, pp. 27–54.
- Foucault, M. *History of Madness*. Edited by J. Khalfa, Routledge, 2006.
- Friedan, B. *The Feminine Mystique*. W.W Norton & Company, INC, 1963.
- Gokhale, Namita. *The Book of Shadows*. Penguin Books India, 2001.
- Gokhale, Namita. *Priya: In Incredible Indya*. Penguin UK, 2013.
- Gokhale, Namita. *Things to Leave Behind*. Penguin UK, 2016.
- Hariharasudan, A., and S. R. Gnanamony. "Feministic Analysis of Arundhati Roy's Postmodern Indian Fiction: *The God of Small Things*." *Global Journal of Business and Social Science Review (GJBSSR)*, vol. 5, no. 3, 2017, pp. 159–164.
- Hastuti, D. P., D. Gunawan, and R. Andriani. "Liberal Feminism In Movie *North Country* Directed By Niki Caro." *Wanastra: Jurnal Bahasa dan Sastra*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2018, pp. 91–104.
- Kurohman, T. *Liberal Feminism In Bathsheba Character As Seen In Far From The Madding Crowd (2015) FILM*. Doctoral dissertation, Universitas Teknologi Yogyakarta, 2020.
- Mill, J. S. *The Subjection of Women*. Vol. 1, Transaction Publishers, 1869.
- Nahdiyati, A. "An analysis on liberal feminism values of the main character in the film *Miss Potter*." 2009.
- Priyadharshini, P., et al. "Authenticity of Liberal Feminism in Namita Gokhale's Texts." *Linguistics and Culture Review*, vol. 5, no. S1, 2021, pp. 46–59. (Note: Priyadharshini, P., S. Mohan, A. Hariharasudan, and J. Sangeetha are listed as the authors).
- Roy, Arundhati. *The God of Small Things*. Penguin, 1997.
- Roy, Arundhati. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Penguin Random House, 2017.
- Sasani, R. A. "An ecofeminist study of Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal Dreams* and *Prodigal Summer*." *Research Journal in Advanced Humanities*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2024, pp. 145–156.
- Scheyvens, R. "Ecotourism and the empowerment of local communities." *Tourism management*, vol. 20, no. 2, 1999, pp. 245–249.
- Wollstonecraft, M. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. 1792.