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ARUNDHATI ROY'S NOVEL, *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*: LITERATURE, INTANGIBLE HERITAGE, AND ECOLOGICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Dr. Ezzeldin Elmadda[1], Dr. Mohammad Akbar Ali[2]
[1]*Department of Foreign Languages, Al-Baha University, KSA.*
[2]*Department of Foreign Languages, Al-Baha University, KSA.*

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ABSTRACT

This study examines Arundhati Roy's novel The God of Small Things *as a literary site for the preservation and transmission of both intangible cultural and ecological heritage. Drawing on ecocritical theory, environmental humanities, and heritage studies, the paper explores how Roy's narrative encodes social customs, rituals, ecological knowledge, and collective memory. Focusing on the Meenachal River, village landscapes, and local practices, the study demonstrates that literature serves as a dynamic archive – documenting endangered traditions while fostering ethical reflection on human-environment interactions. By highlighting the interdependence of culture and nature, the research shows how Roy's work bridges historical memory and contemporary ecological awareness. The paper also explores the implications for heritage policy, digital preservation, and sustainable cultural engagement, emphasizing the interdisciplinary potential of literature. Findings suggest that literary texts both reflect and conserve ecological and cultural realities, making fiction a key medium for safeguarding intangible heritage and ecological awareness. Ultimately, this study positions* The God of Small Things *as a model for understanding how literature can preserve both human and environmental legacies, encouraging readers to engage critically with the ethical, social, and ecological dimensions of cultural memory.*

KEYWORDS: *Arundhati Roy,* The God of Small Things*, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Ecological Heritage, Ecocriticism, Environmental Humanities, Cultural Memory, Sustainable Engagement.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Literature has long been recognized as a repository of cultural memory and a medium for transmitting ecological knowledge. In the Indian context, literary texts often intertwine human and environmental narratives, reflecting the intricate bond between communities and their landscapes (Buell, 2005, p. 12; Goswami, 2024, p. 37). Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (2008) offers a rich site for exploring these intersections, portraying the river, forests, family rituals, and village practices as interwoven components of cultural and ecological memory. As Roy highlights that the Meenachal River is not merely as a natural setting, but also an active participant in social and cultural life. The Meenacha riverl functions as both a literal and symbolic current of memory—one that embodies Kerala's ecological rhythms and the spiritual consciousness of its people. Its unpredictable nature, where "no one knows what it may snatch or suddenly yield" (Roy, 2008, p. 263), mirrors the fragile balance between human experience and environmental uncertainty, encapsulating local ecological wisdom.

Intangible cultural heritage (ICH), defined by UNESCO (2003) as "practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills that communities recognize as part of their cultural heritage," encompasses oral traditions, rituals, festivals, and ecological knowledge embedded in everyday practices. Roy's novel situates these elements within the landscapes of Kerala, documenting fishing rituals, seasonal festivals, domestic customs, and vernacular ecological knowledge. Such literary portrayals function as a living archive, preserving knowledge that is increasingly threatened by modernization, migration, and environmental degradation. This study integrates three analytical frameworks — ICH, ecocriticism, and environmental humanities — to examine how literature mediates the relationship between culture and ecology. Ecocritical approaches consider the representation of nature and human–environment interactions in literature (Garrard, 2012, p. 189), while environmental humanities emphasize ethical reflection, cultural sustainability, and interdisciplinary understanding. By combining these perspectives, this paper positions *The God of Small Things* as a convergence point where narrative preserves endangered traditions, encodes ecological knowledge, and fosters ethical awareness.

The novel's depiction of the river, gardens, and domestic spaces illustrates how literary texts can archive both tangible and intangible forms of heritage. Literature, in this sense, transcends aesthetic or entertainment value to become a tool for cultural and environmental sustainability, bridging historical memory, local knowledge, and ethical reflection. Through textual analysis, this study demonstrates that Roy's work exemplifies the potential of fiction to document, preserve, and transmit intertwined cultural and ecological knowledge. Thus, it offers insights into heritage

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conservation, policy development, and digital archiving strategies.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws on three interrelated frameworks—Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), ecocriticism, and environmental humanities—to analyze Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (2008) as a dynamic site for the preservation and transmission of cultural and ecological knowledge. Together, these perspectives offer complementary lenses for examining how literature functions simultaneously as an archive of lived traditions and as a medium for ethical reflection on humanity's relationship with the environment.

2.1 Intangible Cultural Heritage

Intangible cultural heritage encompasses practices, expressions, knowledge, and skills transmitted across generations, often embedded within specific social and ecological contexts (UNESCO, 2003, p. 3; Gireesh Kumar & Singh, 2022, p. 1). Literature possesses a distinctive capacity to capture and preserve these immaterial forms of heritage, particularly when tangible or material evidence is fragile, inaccessible, or endangered. In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy's detailed portrayal of domestic rituals, local fishing practices, and seasonal festivals illustrates how storytelling can operate as a form of cultural conservation. Through the depiction of everyday acts (such as the preparation of traditional food, the observance of local religious customs, and the embodied knowledge of the landscape) Roy transforms narrative into a form of living cultural memory.

Moreover, the novel's attention to vernacular ecological knowledge—the intimate understanding of the river, monsoon cycles, and flora—demonstrates how ICH and ecological awareness are inseparably intertwined (Nakai, 2021, p. 116). The Meenachal River, for instance, is more than a geographical feature; it embodies the collective consciousness of the community and preserves the rhythms of local life. Thus, the Meenachal River exemplifies Li's (2022, p. 5) description of intangible cultural heritage as "the way of life and historical and cultural traditions of the people in the community." The river is a living part of cultural identity for the communities where rituals, festivals, songs, and daily interactions along its banks enhance cultural awareness. This actively transmits traditions across generations, showing how natural landscapes can serve as vessels of intangible heritage. By embedding these cultural and ecological practices within her prose, Roy not only documents threatened traditions, but also invites readers to recognize literature as a repository of sustainable knowledge systems. This preservation becomes particularly significant in regions facing rapid modernization and environmental degradation, where literary texts serve as enduring records of practices that might otherwise disappear.

2.2 Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism examines the representation of nature, human–environment interactions, and ecological consciousness in literature (Garrard, 2012; Heise, 2008). In *The God of Small Things*, Roy's depiction of the Meenachal River, village gardens, and surrounding forests extends beyond mere scenic backdrop. These landscapes function as active participants in the narrative, shaping human experience and reflecting seasonal cycles, ecological transformations, and ethical responsibilities. For example, the Meenachal River is portrayed as both nurturing and unpredictable, embodying the community's intimate knowledge of environmental rhythms and their consequences.

The novel illustrates how ecological knowledge is deeply interwoven with cultural practices: fishing rituals, agricultural routines, and local festivals are synchronized with monsoon patterns, tidal shifts, and seasonal changes, highlighting the inseparability of human culture and natural systems (Buell, 2005; Rao, 2020). By foregrounding these interconnections, Roy demonstrates that literature can function as a conduit for environmental awareness, offering readers insight into sustainable practices and ethical engagement with the natural world. Ecocritical analysis, thus enables an exploration of fiction not merely as storytelling, but as a vehicle for understanding ecological interdependence and the moral dimensions of human–environment relationships.

2.3 Environmental Humanities

The environmental humanities extend beyond the study of ecology to examine the ethical, cultural, and historical dimensions of human–environment relationships, bridging literary studies with anthropology, heritage studies, and sustainability scholarship. In *The God of Small Things*, Roy exemplifies this interdisciplinary approach by illustrating how storytelling mediates cultural memory, ecological knowledge, and moral consciousness. Through her depiction of the river, forests, gardens, and communal spaces, the novel foregrounds human responsibilities toward both the natural environment and the social world, emphasizing the ethical and social consequences of human actions.

By integrating the insights of Intangible Cultural Heritage and ecocriticism, Roy demonstrates that literature can function as a repository for endangered traditions, vernacular ecological knowledge, and collective memory. Goswami and Khan (2024) discuss how Indian novels, including Roy's *The God of Small Things*, serve environmental and cultural awareness functions. The narrative shows that cultural and ecological practices are inseparably linked: festivals, rituals, agricultural routines, and daily interactions with the environment are all embedded within local ecological rhythms. In doing so, the novel positions literature as a living archive that preserves intangible heritage while fostering ethical reflection, environmental awareness, and cultural sustainability Ultimately, *The God of Small Things* exemplifies how fiction can actively contribute to both cultural and ecological preservation, offering readers insight into sustainable practices and the moral dimensions of human–environment interdependence. By documenting and transmitting intertwined forms of knowledge, Roy's narrative demonstrates

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that literature is not only a vehicle for storytelling, but also a practical tool for engaging with heritage, ethics, and environmental stewardship.

3. LITERARY ANALYSIS: ECOLOGICAL LANDSCAPES AND CULTURAL MEMORY

This section explores how *The God of Small Things* documents and preserves intertwined ecological and cultural knowledge through its depiction of the river, gardens, forests, and rituals. By examining human interactions with these landscapes, the novel reveals how environmental awareness, social memory, and ethical reflection are embedded in everyday practices. Using the combined lenses of Intangible Cultural Heritage, ecocriticism, and environmental humanities, the analysis highlights how Roy constructs spaces that function as living archives. These spaces capture sensory, social, and ecological dimensions of heritage. The following subsections examine the Meenachal River, landscapes as ecological texts, rituals and cultural practices, and human–environment interactions to demonstrate literature's role in sustaining both cultural and ecological memory.

3.1 The Meenachal River

The Meenachal River functions as both a physical and symbolic site of memory, anchoring cultural and ecological life within Roy's narrative. It is a home for family rituals, fishing practices, and local festivals converge, reflecting the intimate integration of ecological knowledge and social traditions (Roy, 2008; UNESCO, 2003). It also serves as a central symbol that reflects both physical and emotional landscape, mirroring the transformations in Ayemenem and in the lives of its characters. As children, Rahel and Estha experience the river as a site of wonder and freedom, where "*It was warm, the water. Greygreen. Like rippled silk. With fish in it. The sky and trees in it. And at night the broken yellow moon in it*" (Roy, 2008, p. 128). The river's fluid beauty captures the twins' sense of innocence and connection to the natural world. Yet when Rahel returns as an adult, that vitality has withered and "The river shrinks and black crows gorge on bright mangoes in still, dustgreen trees." (Roy, 2008, p. 11) and the Meenachal becomes a stagnant, ghostly presence, echoing the decay of the Ipe family and the suffocating weight of memory. By the time it reappears as the site of Sophie Mol's drowning and Estha's and Rahel's reunion, the river has evolved into a threshold between past and present, love and loss. Through these shifting images, Roy transforms the Meenachal from a simple geographic feature into a living symbol of emotional continuity, time's passage, the erosion of innocence, and historicl memory of human experience.

Roy's detailed attention to the river's seasonal fluctuations and monsoon cycles emphasizes the delicate balance between human activity and environmental rhythms. This demonstrates how natural forces shape cultural practices and ethical sensibilities.

For example, descriptions of the river during the monsoon not only reveal environmental transformations, but also their influence on communal routines, familial interactions, and local ethical norms. The river, therefore, operates as a repository of intergenerational memory, linking characters to their heritage while simultaneously situating them within the broader ecological landscape (Rao, 2020). At the same time, the narrative draws attention to threats such as pollution and industrial intrusion, highlighting the vulnerability of both ecological and cultural continuity. By portraying the river as a living participant in social and cultural life, Roy underscores literature's capacity to preserve awareness of endangered natural and social systems, emphasizing the inseparability of ecological knowledge and cultural memory.

3.2 Landscapes as Ecological Texts

In *The God of Small Things*, gardens, forests, and groves operate as ecological texts, reflecting the intricate and reciprocal relationship between humans and their environment (Garrard, 2012; Heise, 2008). The Ayemenem house garden, described with careful attention to plant species, flowering cycles, and household rituals, exemplifies how ecological knowledge is embedded within domestic life (Roy, 2008; Buell, 2005). Through these depictions, Roy demonstrates that even seemingly ordinary spaces carry layered meanings, encoding practical environmental understanding alongside cultural and familial memory.

Forests, groves, and surrounding landscapes serve as arenas for learning, play, and ritual practice, illustrating how local ecosystems actively shape communal identity, social cohesion, and intergenerational knowledge transmission. By portraying these spaces as sites of cultural negotiation, Roy emphasizes that human engagement with the environment is both material and symbolic, reflecting ethical responsibility as well as cultural belonging.

Such textual landscapes function as repositories of ecological and cultural knowledge, preserving practices, seasonal rhythms, and sensorial experiences that might otherwise be lost to modernization, migration, or environmental degradation. In this sense, literature becomes an archive: it safeguards the sensory, ethical, and practical dimensions of human–environment interaction, offering readers both insight into ecological literacy and an ethical framework for engaging with the natural world.

3.3 Rituals and Cultural Practices

Rituals and festivals—including family ceremonies, religious observances, and communal activities—play a crucial role in preserving intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2003). In *The God of Small Things*, Roy illustrates how these practices are intimately linked with ecological knowledge and environmental rhythms. Fishing rituals, for example, align with seasonal cycles and monsoon patterns, while agricultural festivals mark planting and harvest periods. Domestic practices, such as food preparation and household observances, encode traditional knowledge that guides social behavior and fosters intergenerational continuity.

Roy's narrative captures these rituals in rich, sensory detail, demonstrating how cultural practices are inseparable from both the natural environment and social structures. By documenting

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them, literature functions as a living archive, ensuring that ecological knowledge and cultural memory transcend immediate communities and remain accessible to future generations" (Zapf, 2021, p. 127). Through these depictions, Roy emphasizes that cultural heritage is not static; it is enacted through practice, embedded in landscapes, and sustained by human interaction with both community and environment. Literature, therefore, serves as a medium through which intangible heritage, ecological awareness, and ethical reflection converge.

3.4 Human–Environment Interaction

In *The God of Small Things*, Roy's characters engage with rivers, forests, and gardens in ways that reveal care, ethical responsibility, and ecological consciousness (Buell, 2005). These interactions portray humans not as separate from ecological systems, but as active participants within them. For instance, children's playful engagement with the Meenachal River involves observational learning of seasonal patterns and environmental dynamics, while adult characters' rituals and practices demonstrate sustainable interaction with natural resources. Such portrayals highlight a nuanced understanding of the interdependence between human behavior and ecological systems, fostering ethical reflection on environmental responsibility.

By examining landscapes, rituals, and human–environment interactions together, the novel illustrates literature's capacity to document, preserve, and transmit intertwined ecological and cultural knowledge. Roy emphasizes that cultural and environmental memory are inseparable: rivers, gardens, and forests carry not only ecological significance but also social, historical, and ethical meaning. Fiction thus emerges as a dynamic medium for safeguarding intangible heritage, cultivating ecological awareness, and encouraging ethical engagement with the environment.

4. LITERATURE AS HERITAGE DOCUMENTATION

Building on the analysis of ecological landscapes, human–environment interactions, and cultural practices, this section examines how literature functions as a repository and transmitter of heritage. Fiction not only reflects cultural memory and ecological knowledge but also actively preserves practices, rituals, and ethical insights for future generations. By exploring *The God of Small Things* as a living archive, this section highlights the novel's role in sustaining intangible cultural and environmental heritage, bridging literary study with broader concerns of preservation, ethics, and sustainability.

4.1 Literature as a Medium of Preservation

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* functions as a living archive, preserving both tangible and intangible forms of heritage (Roy, 2008; UNESCO, 2003). Unlike conventional archives, which primarily store material evidence, literature captures lived experience, emotions, and cultural context, providing readers with an immersive understanding of the daily rhythms, rituals, and ecological practices of particular communities. Through its detailed narrative, the novel documents the intergenerational transmission of knowledge, encompassing seasonal festivals, family customs, vernacular ecological understanding, and communal interactions.

By embedding social and ecological knowledge within its narrative structure, literature sustains memory even in the absence of material records" (Tola, 2019, p. 208). Roy demonstrates how practices such as fishing rituals, domestic routines, and garden management encode ecological and ethical understanding, highlighting the inseparability of culture and environment. In this sense, literature does not merely represent heritage; it actively preserves and transmits it, safeguarding practices that may otherwise be lost due to modernization, migration, or environmental degradation. As a medium of preservation, fiction thus becomes a dynamic tool for both cultural continuity and ecological awareness, offering insights into the lived experience of communities while maintaining ethical and environmental consciousness.

4.2 Documenting Endangered Traditions

Arundhati Roy's detailed portrayal of rituals, food customs, folk beliefs, and communal practices ensures the visibility and continuity of traditions that might otherwise fade from collective memory, with food serving as a key medium for conveying cultural nuances and social hierarchies (Narmadha R. & Subitsha S., 2024, p. 97). In *The God of Small Things*, practices such as bathing rituals in the Meenachal River, seasonal fishing routines, domestic ceremonies, and festive observances are depicted with precision, illustrating the interdependence between culture and environment. These representations are not mere literary embellishments; they function as meticulous documentation of how ecological knowledge, ethical practices, and cultural identity are intertwined.

By recording these traditions, literature acts as a bridge connecting past and present communities, allowing readers to access the sensory, social, and ecological dimensions of heritage that might be inaccessible in material archives alone. Furthermore, Roy's narrative preserves the rhythms of seasonal and environmental cycles, showing how festivals, agricultural routines, and communal rituals are aligned with ecological patterns. This alignment underscores the novel's dual function as both a cultural and environmental archive: it safeguards intangible heritage while simultaneously promoting awareness of sustainable practices embedded in traditional knowledge systems.

In this way, fiction transcends storytelling to become an active agent in heritage preservation, ensuring that endangered traditions remain legible, meaningful, and relevant across generations. Literature thus functions as a repository of collective memory, an ethical guide, and a record of the delicate balance between human communities and their ecological surroundings.

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4.3 Literature as a Bridge Across Generations

Building on its role as a medium of preservation and documentation, literature functions as a bridge connecting past, present, and future generations. In *The God of Small Things*, Roy not only captures the textures of daily life, rituals, and ecological knowledge, but also transmits these practices across temporal and social boundaries, ensuring that endangered traditions remain accessible and meaningful (Roy, 2008). By embedding intangible heritage within narrative, literature allows readers to experience cultural memory and environmental consciousness in ways that transcend material limitations, linking communities to their ecological and social histories.

This bridging function reinforces the ethical dimension of heritage preservation. As readers encounter the intricate interplay of culture and ecology—through rivers, gardens, festivals, and domestic routines—they are invited to reflect on human responsibilities toward both natural and social environments. Fiction thus becomes an active participant in sustaining collective memory, preserving ecological knowledge, and fostering continuity of cultural identity. In this way, literature functions not just as a record of the past, but as a powerful tool for connecting with heritage, fostering ethical awareness, and promoting sustainable practices across generations.

4.4 Implications for Heritage Policy and Digital Preservation

The preservation of intangible cultural and ecological knowledge in literature has significant implications for heritage policy and digital archiving. Roy's *The God of Small Things* demonstrates how narrative can document rituals, ecological practices, and communal traditions that might otherwise be lost, providing a model for integrating literary records into broader heritage preservation strategies.

Digital tools—such as interactive maps, multimedia storytelling, and online archives—can complement literary documentation by making these cultural and environmental practices widely accessible, facilitating both community engagement and scholarly research. Literary texts, with their depictions of ecological knowledge, seasonal cycles, and ritual practices, serve as vital repositories of intangible cultural heritage (ICH), and digital platforms play a crucial role in ensuring their preservation and dissemination. As Rodil (2017, p. 78) observes, such initiatives can be used "to enhance the discourse on the various ways in which we can look at ICH and its preservation through digital means," enabling communities to safeguard traditional knowledge and practices while making them accessible and resilient in the face of modernization, migration, and environmental degradation. Moreover, literary documentation can inform policy frameworks that prioritize ethical engagement with both cultural and natural resources. Policymakers can draw on such texts to design heritage programs that recognize the intertwined nature of social and ecological systems, promoting sustainable practices while respecting community traditions (Buell, 2005; Heise, 2008). In this way, literature functions not only as a repository of memory, but also as a practical tool for cultural sustainability, bridging scholarship, policy, and community-based preservation initiatives.

5. CONCLUSION

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* exemplifies the capacity of literature to serve simultaneously as an archive and an ethical guide, preserving ecological and cultural heritage while fostering reflection on human–environment relationships. Through detailed depictions of rivers, gardens, forests, and rituals, the novel captures intergenerational memory and highlights the inseparability of social and ecological knowledge. The Meenachal River, domestic gardens, and village landscapes emerge as living texts, encoding both practical and symbolic environmental understanding. Festivals, family customs, and vernacular practices illustrate the interconnection between ecological awareness and cultural identity, underscoring literature's role in sustaining intangible heritage across generations (Roy, 2008; UNESCO, 2003).

By integrating frameworks from ecocriticism, environmental humanities, and heritage studies, this study demonstrates literature's interdisciplinary potential in promoting cultural sustainability. Fiction facilitates ethical reflection, promotes responsible engagement with both natural and cultural resources, and preserves endangered practices that could otherwise disappear due to modernization, migration, or environmental degradation. Roy's narrative exemplifies how storytelling functions as an ethical archive, transmitting values, ecological knowledge, and cultural practices together. This shows that literature is not merely descriptive, but prescriptive in guiding cultural and environmental stewardship.

The implications extend beyond literary analysis. Literary texts can inform heritage policy, digital archiving, and community-based preservation initiatives. Digital storytelling and interactive archives expand access to cultural heritage, preserve intangible traditions, and foster ethical engagement among diverse audiences.

To conclude, *The God of Small Things* positions literature as a dynamic medium for preserving and transmitting ecological and cultural memory. Storytelling emerges as a vital tool for safeguarding heritage, cultivating ethical reflection, and promoting cultural sustainability. Literature, thus functions as an indispensable bridge between human experience, environmental consciousness, and collective memory. It offers both scholarly insight and practical guidance for heritage and ecological engagement.

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