

Revealing The Musical Ecologies In Arundhati Roy's The God Of Small Things

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Keywords:	Abstract:
Ecology, Human, Sound, Colonialism.	Edward Said and Jonathan Sterne highlight the interconnectedness between the environment and human experience, highlighting the importance of the environment in human development and creativity. However, the portrayal of the environment as a resource often obscures its complexity and connection to marginalized populations. Listening serves as a missing piece between matter and human perception, enhancing our connection with the environment. Arundhati Roy's novel, The God of Small Things, challenges colonialism and corporate globalization by transforming the human body into a responsive and intricately connected entity. Roy's aural poetics critiques the supremacy of visual knowledge and semiotic ideologies that favor abstraction over tangible embodiment.

Introduction

Edward Said and Jonathan Sterne, though from distinct perspectives, emphasise the intricate interconnection between the environment and human experience. The environment, a unique continuum of “vibrant matter” (Bennett viii), is far from a mere blank slate awaiting cultural and historical inscription. It is the condition through which human bodies interact, serving as the fundamental basis for human development and creativity. Nonetheless, the essential endeavour of discovering innovative forms that illustrate the interconnection between the human body and the natural environment presents challenges inherently linked to what Rob Nixon refers to as “the geographies of concealment in a neoliberal age” (SVEP 444). The rhetorical portrayal of the natural environment as a repository of utilitarian elements, merely as a resource and goods, in the late twentieth century often obscures its intricate ecologies, its vitality, and, most importantly, its connection with subaltern and marginalised human populations. Although this imaginative challenge has historically been articulated through visual and auditory means to combat historical omissions and to amplify marginalised voices, it has inadequately considered the tangible sounds of the physical environment: the tones of water, air, and land. The act of listening, which I contend serves as the missing piece between matter and human perception, enhances our connection with the environment.

In opposition to the disintegrative forces of colonialism and corporate globalisation, Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things provides a basis for sensory engagement, transforming the human body from a confined and isolated entity into one that is profoundly responsive to and intricately connected with its surroundings. The novel, set in Kerala on India's southwest coast, depicts the region's sociopolitical landscape in the 1960s and 1990s through the perspectives of seven-year-old twins, Rahel and Estha, and thirty-one-year-old Rahel. The novel traverses fragmented narratives of a largely suppressed family history, detailing the exile of the twins' upper-caste Syrian Christian mother for marrying and divorcing an abusive

Hindu, alongside the violent assault of the untouchable Dalit carpenter, Velutha, accused of raping their mother. It illuminates rigid caste and marriage regulations, illicit relationships, and state-sanctioned acts of violence. This study aims to uncover the author's awareness of acoustic ecologies the sounds of the material environment and the historical insights they contain while acknowledging that Roy's visual imagery poignantly reveals the disruptions to the twins' seemingly complete childhood.

What is specifically at risk when history manifests itself in and through materiality? What is the significance of engaging with history via auditory means? "Smiling out loud," "listening with one's eyes" (20): Roy's references to a blending of the senses throughout the novel embed sound within a sensory continuum that engages multiple senses concurrently. The sensation of sound, although chiefly linked to the ear, actually intertwines with other forms of perception. Don Ihde posits in his exploration of auditory experience that "The gradations of hearing shade off into a larger sense of one's body in listening. The ears may be focal 'organs' of hearing, but one listens with his whole body" (135–36). Sound is defined as a physical phenomenon, characterised by fluctuations in air pressure caused by object vibrations, which impact the human body across multiple sensory modalities; it implies not only an auditory but also a tactile, visual, and olfactory experience.

A focus on sound, and consequently on the interdependence of various sensory modalities rather than their isolation, challenges capitalist and colonial narratives that deliberately segregate the senses into separate perceptual categories and sensory processes. In his analysis of nineteenth-century Paris, Walter Benjamin discusses display technologies that facilitated the integration of commodities into the visual domain of modern existence, evident in advertisements, window displays, and store design, which directed consumption through a singular sensory organ: the eye. Bill Ashcroft also emphasises the preeminence of visual knowledge, especially its function in reinforcing hierarchies of power and control. He draws attention to the marginalisation of local or indigenous epistemologies under what he terms "the passion of the ocular," a fervour that significantly shaped "the conception, representation, and experiencing of place in the colonized world" (127).

Roy's aural poetics critiques the supremacy of visual knowledge over alternative epistemologies and, by extension, the semiotic ideologies that favour abstraction over tangible embodiment in their representational practices. The core of the tragedies in *The God of Small Things* lies in the policing elements that risk deviating from these abstract representational paradigms. In this context, Aarthi Vadde posits that a rigid commitment to ocularcentric taxonomies engenders "aesthetic, scientific, and social forms of violence" (533) spanning from Baby Kochamma's horticultural aspiration to convert a perceived wilderness into a meticulously curated landscape, to Velutha's brutal assault justified by semiotic boundaries that dictate "who should be loved, and how" (33).

Roy utilises the esteemed position of sight within dominating Western philosophical traditions, alongside touch as a means of direct interaction, to direct the reader's focus towards hearing by transforming both into venues for auditory experiences. Instead of reinforcing the sensory hierarchy that Roy's novel seeks to deconstruct, the interpretation presented here positions sound as the dominant element of sensory interaction. According to Steven Connor, "The self defined in terms of hearing rather than sight is a self imaged not as a point, but as a membrane; not as a picture, but as a channel through which voices, noises and musics travel" (207). Sound, linked to the principles of resonance, traversal, and transference, permeates and reconfigures space, blurring the distinctions between spatially separated points and planes. Furthermore, it is most prominently exhibited when reflecting off solid objects, a phenomenon illustrated by the discovery of the telephone that "literally succeeded in making iron talk" (208). The interconvertibility of sound and matter enables Roy to transform the material world into a vessel of meaning throughout her novel.

Roy's focus on the integration of sound with other senses undermines the supremacy of vision and fosters a more profoundly engaged and ecologically aware humanism that acknowledges the body's capacity to extend into and be altered by the external environment. Furthermore, the semantic openness of sound's structural textures and nuances renders the act of listening exceptionally receptive to novel and potentially surprising experiential encounters. Fully exploring the potential of Roy's auditory poetics necessitates an examination of her dual representation of auditory signals through physical movements that

vividly animate the natural world and encourage the reader to reevaluate dominant perceptions of the environment. Five An engagement with the tangible materiality of acoustic ecologies provides a “path through history” (Sterne 3) that challenges ocularcentric paradigms and integrates the burgeoning disciplines of sound studies, postcolonial ecocriticism, and new materialist perspectives, which redefine critical interpretations of matter, bodies, and agencies. All these frameworks elucidate an aesthetic wherein muted voices are conveyed through the material environment, and agency manifests as a redefined act of interpretation.

References to vision or more accurately, to its absence or distortion pervade *The God of Small Things* from the outset. In Roy's introduction to the novel's characters, including the twins' mother Ammu, their grandparents Mammachi and Pappachi, and their grandaunt Baby Kochamma, one of our initial impressions of Estha “barely awake, his aching eyes glittering like glass” (7) depicts vision as hindered by exhaustion and distress. It also evokes the mediaeval notion of the eye as a mirror, undermining the concept of direct, immediate vision. Mammachi's near-blindness and the dark glasses she dons in public signify a deficiency in both sight and visibility. Roy's character representations reveal the potential constraints of vision while also implying the merging of the visual and the auditory. For example, when she depicts the tears Mammachi weeps upon the demise of her grandchild, Sophie Mol, as “[trembling] along her jaw like raindrops on the edge of a roof” (7), she redirects focus from visual indicators of Mammachi's sorrow to the oscillatory, quivering movement that her tears generate in the surrounding air particles. The connection between tears and vibration, along with their metaphorical comparison to raindrops, prompts the reader to visualise and auditory experience the scene, initiating Roy's nuanced integration of her audience into a sonic, vibrating realm.

To conduct an analysis that is sonically attuned to the submerged histories in *The God of Small Things*, it must transcend the examination of human voices and unveil the text's fabric to encompass voices mediated by what David Abram refers to as the “more-than-human” world (Spell x). Mammachi's opposition to prevailing representations of Indian femininity is evident only when viewed through a lens that acknowledges the interplay between material culture and human experience, while also closely examining the significance of bodily perception and the diverse characteristics of the entities involved in that process. Initially, Mammachi's voice does not reverberate within the male-dominated and imperial context of vocal suppression. She is a proficient violinist but compelled to discontinue her violin lessons due to her husband's attempts to suppress her musical aspirations. She persistently engages in her passion privately, seemingly acquiescing to a specific South Indian paradigm of domesticity that perceives musicianship as a spiritually enriching domestic endeavour and a unifying force between spouses (Weidman 138). Furthermore, her depiction as a light-skinned beauty “Her pale, fine skin . . . creased like cream on cooling milk” (158) and the compositions she performs on her violin, authored by Western and Russian composers, embody the imperial ideals that persist in postcolonial India. Mammachi's preference for the violin as her instrument is significant, as the violin had been introduced to South India by British and French colonial officials.

Nevertheless, the violin offers Mammachi a form of nuanced defiance. Despite its Western origins and design, the violin was embraced and modified by South Indian musicians, “who gradually altered its tuning, playing position, and technique” (Weidman 25). Amanda J. Weidman, in *Singing the Classical, Voicing the Modern*, highlights the pivotal function of the European violin in shaping the identity of Karnatic classical music. The instrument's remarkable ability to replicate the human voice, along with its contribution to the reclassification of Karnatic music as “classical,” facilitated the transition of Karnatic music into the contemporary era while maintaining its authenticity (Weidman 26). Consequently, Mammachi's selection of the violin may be interpreted more as an affirmation of her Indian musical heritage than as an acceptance of imperial ideals. Mammachi arguably channels the energy and emotional intensity of the compositions she performs, reflecting her own unexpressed moods and feelings: from the sombre, introspective depths of Handel's “Lentement” to the grandiose exuberance of Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker Suite*.

How does a colonial device that has “gone native” (Weidman 25) come to be perceived not only as a real indigenous voice as well as as a representation of the environment? The violin's capacity to compete

with the human voice in range, depth, and tonal subtlety facilitates a convergence of human and nonhuman domains, fundamentally reliant on the instrument's ventriloquising capability. "The perfect violin accompanist is one, whose playing is so self-effacing and unobtrusive that the vocalist forgets there is anything except her voice. At the same time, the vocalist cannot be heard without the violin" (56). According to the principles of ventriloquism, Weidman further elucidates, the sound of the violin becomes "associated with a wordless, primeval voice, a pure voice that has the power to affect by transcending its colonial instrumental body and its ties to language. It is precisely the capacity of the instrument to be heard as a voice, to sound almost human while remaining nonhuman and to sound Indian while remaining foreign, which makes it powerful" (57; emphasis added). Weidman emphasises the connection between the original (Karnatic) voice and mere representation (or musical accompaniment), which is essential for the emergence of an authentic voice; however, my interpretation suggests that the hollow body of the violin serves as a mediating agent in meaning production. A violin, constructed from natural materials, possesses unique wood properties that produce diverse vibrations, thereby granting a voice to one who would otherwise remain silent. Similar to the violin maker who meticulously shapes, thins, taps, and flexes the wood until achieving the desired vibratory response, the violinist, engaging with the instrument's vibratory feedback through various contact points, obtains a form of tactile feedback from it. Mammachi's capacity to construct intricately layered sonic realms through her expertise in classical compositions stems from a tangible interaction, wherein the act of playing the instrument transforms into a collaboration between the violinist and the violin. According to LambrosMalafouris's argument regarding material agency, "the line between human intention and material affordance becomes all the more difficult to draw" (33). Mammachi exhibits an embodied skill through her fingers' movements, which are attuned to the tactile information received from the instrument via touch and sound, demonstrating reciprocal perceptual responsiveness.

The interplay of touch and sound in *The God of Small Things* evokes tactile experiences that compel readers to perceive sounds more intensely, and even aggressively, than they might audibly experience them. Consider Roy's depiction of the sound of rain violently striking the ground as Rahel returns to her hometown, Ayemenem: "Slanting silver ropes slammed into loose earth, plowing it up like gunfire" (4). In this scenario, intense precipitation acts as a forceful and abrupt attack on the fragile structures of the ear: "The old house on the hill [wearing] its steep, gabled roof pulled over its ears like a low hat" seemingly reacting to the auditory disruption. The auditory component emerges in additional, frequently intriguing and unforeseen manners, transforming the act of reading into a tactile experience of listening. A "fan-whirring, peanut-crunching darkness" (94) envelops Rahel and her family during a trip to the cinema. Roy delineates a sonic realm that is tangible and physical, encompassing a "high, piping voice, frayed and fibrous now, like sugarcane stripped of its bark" (15) to vocal expressions that "came out jagged. Like a piece of tin" (29) Roy transcends the mere infusion of visual perceptions with auditory qualities and vice versa, whether encapsulating the acoustic ambiance of a cinema or depicting the sound of human voices. Instead, she renders the physical characteristics and dynamics of a sound's material origin, transforming sound from abstract tonal qualities and waveforms into tangible textures that the reader perceives through auditory experience.

Roy's aural poetics reveal that the temporality of submerged, unarticulated histories, as illuminated by matter, is neither linear nor exclusively situated within the realm of consciously experienced realities. The abrupt and discordant sounds of rainfall suggest moments from the past seized abruptly and unexpectedly: "Heaven opened and the water hammered down, reviving the reluctant old well, greenmossing the pigless pigsty, carpet bombing still, tea-colored puddles the way memory bombs still, tea-colored minds" (11). Aural perception indicates the emergence of latent memory traces that arise similarly in the sounds accompanying a conversation centred on Velutha. As Velutha's current employer and another small-scale entrepreneur deliberate the potential of his ongoing employment at a pickle factory, a woman in the background "stared vacantly at the wall opposite her, rocking herself gently, grunting regular, rhythmic little grunts, like a bored passenger on a long bus journey" (255). Although perceived by the narrator as a source of comfort, "Like the ticking of a clock. A sound you hardly noticed, but would miss if it stopped" (263) The subtle, often overlooked sounds produced by the human body generate a

disconcerting sense of ambiguity and perplexity; they may presage Velutha's abrupt awakening from slumber, met with boots and "surprised by shattered kneecaps" (292).

The emphasis on sound as both an expressive and disrupting force is paired with a focus on the mediating role of the medium that conveys sound: air. Rahel's reflections on the ambiance upon her return to her hometown after a twenty-five-year absence provide a vivid portrayal of the material environment in which, alongside water, all living entities are enveloped:

She had forgotten just how damp the monsoon air in Ayemenem could be. Swollen cupboards creaked. Locked windows burst open. Books got soft and wavy between their covers. Strange insects appeared like ideas in the evenings and burned themselves on Baby Kochamma's dim forty - watt bulbs. In the daytime their crisp, incinerated corpses littered the floor and windowsills, and until Kochu Mariaswept them away in her plastic dustpan, the air smelled of Something Burning. (11)

The humid monsoon air manifests through various sensory experiences: the creaking of cupboards, the tactile vibration of windows flinging open, and the texture of soft, undulating paper. Its mediating function is most prominently revealed in its association with olfactory remnants left by "strange insects" akin to "ideas." Roy's analogy implies a sequence of material significations that links the scent "of Something Burning" to concepts that distinctly permeate the environment. Connecting this unique scent with Roy's frequent references to volatile secrets concealed within "tea-colored minds," we can interpret the atmosphere as literally infused with memories that elude representation, searing themselves onto "dim forty-watt bulbs" and leaving no discernible remnants. The scene recognises the challenge of sustaining physical closeness to obscurity and violence, as the concepts have been erased; however, unsettling recollections of the past persist as a palpable presence: odour. Roy's portrayal of Rahel's unarticulated trepidation during a medical appointment transcends the confines of corporeal experience, delving into a realm where the body (or psyche) remains inseparable from its environment: "The slow ceiling fan sliced the thick, frightened air into an unending spiral that spun slowly to the floor like the peeled skin of an endless potato" (126).

Similar to Pappachi's act of mutilating Rahel's cherished gumboots with scissors that "[make] snicking scissor-sounds" (172), emphasising the brutality of his actions, the violent confrontation between Rahel's manifested fear and the acute edges of a ceiling In each of these cases, the atmosphere a mixture of various gases, cries, and human sentiments observes and demands a reaction to disturbances of peace and serenity through the conveyance of physical substances that encapsulate the material remnants of their source, from the "sour metal smell" (70) suggesting human flesh abraded by metal handcuffs to the jarring and unsettling sounds of boots striking ribs. The air, in a literal sense, compels the reader to "experience the relationship between persons and other materialities more horizontally . . . to take a step toward a more ecological sensibility" (Bennett 10).

Roy's emphasis on embodied memory and haptic sound reflects a wider intrigue with tactile experiences and the understanding they facilitate. Estha, for example, renders his sister's whispers tangibly perceptible to the reader by contacting her lips: "To touch the words it makes. To keep the whisper" (310) . As Estha's "fingers follow the shape of it" (310), he perceives his sister's expressions in their tangible reality his ears caressed by her "whispers" just as "His hand is held and kissed" (310). The twins' tactile interaction indicates a profound physical bond between brother and sister, particularly evident in Rahel's understanding of her brother's thoughts and feelings, even as he withdraws into "stillness,

Once the quietness arrives, it stayed and spread in Estha. It reached out of his head and enfolded him in its swampy arms. It rocked him to the rhythm of an ancient, fetal heartbeat. It sent its stealthy, suckered tentacles inching along the insides of his skull, hovering the knolls and dells of his memory, dislodging old sentences, whisking them off the tip of his tongue. It stripped his thoughts of the words that described them and left them pared and naked. Unspeakable. Numb. . . . Slowly, over the years, Estha withdrew from the world. He grew accustomed to the uneasy octopus that lived inside him and squirted its inky tranquilizer on his past. (13)

Similar to the swamp a boundary between freshwater and saltwater, between land and ocean Estha's silence delineates a division between realms, between the external swamps and the "insides of his skull," between the articulated and the inarticulate, and between the past and the present. It immerses him in a resonant environment akin to a mother's womb, "Rock[ing] him to the rhythm of an ancient, fetal heartbeat." By replicating Estha's previous experience within his mother's womb subjecting him to both his heartbeat and the auditory and rhythmic nuances of his mother's voice his silence can "[dislodge] old sentences" and "[whisk] them off the tip of his tongue." "Stripped . . . of the words that described them," his thoughts scatter and dissipate into a soundscape of dislocation and obliteration, discernible in the squirming octopus residing within his mind. Although the mollusk's "inky ranquizer" can anaesthetise Estha's body against the visual disruptions caused by his past, its effects and the associated sounds paradoxically (re)stimulate his tactile and auditory perceptions. Estha's silence thus manifests as a potent assertion.

As an auditory phenomenon, it endures and retains memory imprints that visual perception has demonstrated an inability to securely maintain. Roy ascribes Rahel's capacity to "communicate" with Estha to the physical movements that accompany his silence: "She could feel the rhythm of Estha's rocking, and the wetness of rain on his skin. She could hear the raucous, scrambled world inside his head" (22 emphasis added). The rhythmic movement of Estha's body, characterised by a repetitive and recognisable temporal pattern, reflects the percussive rain "That lonely drummer" (279) creating a palpable beat or pulse that manifests as sonic action. Rahel's capacity to discern periodic patterns from her brother's physical movements illustrates contemporary scientific findings indicating "that body movement alone can be sufficient to influence auditory encoding of a rhythm stimulus" (Phillips-Silver and Trainor 544). The profundity of their relationship stems not from telepathic or extrasensory communication, as critics often assert, but from a heightened and deeply sensory awareness of one another's moods and emotions.

To facilitate this profound bond between brother and sister, Roy references nature: "Here they studied Silence (like the Children of the Fisher People), and learned the bright language of dragonflies. Here they learned to Wait. To Watch. To think thoughts and not voice them. To move like lightning when the bendy yellow bamboo arced downwards" (194) The children's education occurs in the absence of verbal communication, rendering the surrounding silence a distinct, non-human "language." Concealed beneath its seemingly tranquil surface are elements whose auditory subtleties may elude individuals engrossed in the clamour of contemporary existence, such as Baby Kochamma and her maid Kochu Maria, who are "locked together in a noisy television silence" (28). In contrast to the mass-produced artefacts of civilization such as washing machines, televisions, and computers, which immerse us in a mechanistic, monotonous auditory environment devoid of variation the twins' conversations "surfaced and dipped like mountain streams. Sometimes audible to other people. Sometimes not" (191). Disappearing from view only to resurface from beneath the aquatic depths, they suggest a sonic environment transcending humanity, wherein organic elements streambeds, resonating insects, rainfall generate patterns that never precisely replicate, simultaneously mirroring the rhythms of our own bodies while providing both solace and astonishment.

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