As we have seen in Unit 3, Arundhati Roy’s non-fiction writing explicitly engages environmental issues. However, *The God of Small Things* is equally concerned with exploring the effects of uneven development, resource extraction, environmental pollution, and different definitions of “nature” on the physical world. Although critics have primarily focused on Roy’s distinctive style and innovative form, these aspects of her novel are inseparable from its critique of India’s intertwined histories of human and environmental degradation. Not only does the novel highlight the damaging effects of colonization on the Indian environment, but it also draws attention to the ways in which Indian authorities and businesses continue to exploit natural “resources.”

**Objective:** To identify and evaluate the different environmental attitudes depicted in *The God of Small Things*, highlighting the inseparability of “nature” from “culture.”

**Preparatory Readings and Resources:**
- An interview with Roy that focuses on her environmentalism: [http://www.paulkingsnorth.net/journalism/i-wish-i-had-the-guts-to-shut-up/](http://www.paulkingsnorth.net/journalism/i-wish-i-had-the-guts-to-shut-up/)

**Lecture Points:**
- **Environmental Colonization:** As Roy shows through the examples listed below, colonial approaches to mapping, classifying, and farming the Indian landscape express an exploitative attitude to the non-human world, which pays scant regard to ecological sustainability or the interdependence of humans and their physical surroundings.
  - As an Imperial Entomologist (*TGST* 47-48), Pappachi was an instrument in the colonial machine that alienated Indians from their own culture and environment. The study and classification of insects is invoked by Roy as an example of the ways in which colonizers wanted to systematically know and define the territories they moved into. Just as they “wrote history,” they also produced definitions of the Indian environment, making it understood on their terms.
  - Baby Kochamma’s ornamental garden, cultivated through botanical knowledge acquired at the University of Rochester, demonstrates the extension of colonial attempts to control and tame the Indian environment (26-27). Her antagonistic relationship to the natural world provides a stark contrast to that of the twins and Velutha (discussed below).
  - India’s plantation history is an important context for the novel. This form of intensive farming not only exploits and degrades the land, but also the low-paid workers employed to plant and harvest the crops. The History House is
built on an abandoned rubber estate (51) and Ammu’s ex-husband (the twins’ father) is the assistant manager of a tea estate (39-42).

- **Uneven Development:** If colonialism exploited the Indian landscape by exporting plantation crops for European profit, Roy’s depiction of the tourist industry in postcolonial Kerala suggests the perpetuation of this uneven relationship between India and the “West,” which continues to take its toll on the environment. When Rahel returns to Ayemenem as an adult, she observes how the History House has been transformed into the Heritage Hotel, a luxury destination for foreign visitors (119-21). Despite the renovations, the stench of the nearby river, which has turned toxic as a result of over-farming and industrial pollution, cannot be disguised (cf. 14). This juxtaposition highlights the continuity between the History House’s inescapable sordid past, and the ill-advised efforts of “those clever Hotel People” to “discipline” nature in the manner of their colonial predecessors (120). Roy critiques this exploitative attitude that degrades both the natural environment and the Keralans who live and work there.

- **River-sense:** Unlike the “Hotel People,” Velutha exhibits an affinity with his surroundings—a “river-sense” (30) which he passes on to the twins; for example, by teaching them how to fish (75). The home he shares with his father and paralyzed brother—“a low hut . . . nestled close to the ground, as though it was listening to a whispered subterranean secret” (195)—expresses this sensitivity to the natural world. Roy does not idealize Velutha’s apparent closeness to nature, however. Although his deep connection to the Meenachal River is a key element of what attracts Ammu to him (315-17), he and his family live where they do because they are socially marginalized. The river is a source of income and solace for Velutha and his family, but it is also dangerous and unpredictable as the twins tragically learn (194; 275-78). Velutha’s “river-sense” is, in part, an awareness of this unpredictability (245), which provides an instructive contrast with the colonial and neo-colonial insistence on defining and controlling the environment exemplified by “imperial entomology” and the Heritage Hotel.

**Discussion Questions:**

- Close read the four opening paragraphs of the novel in class (from “May in Ayemenem . . .” to “A drenched mongoose . . .” [3-4]). How and why does Roy establish environmental awareness from the very beginning of her novel? What impression does she give of the Kerala landscape? Is there anything striking or unusual about her descriptions of the weather and wildlife? What expectations does this introduction establish for the rest of the novel?

- What does the Meenacahal River symbolize in the novel? Why do you think Roy chose to make Sophie Mol’s drowning the central event of the novel? How does this tragedy relate to Roy’s environmental views?

- Both the History House and the tea estate are sites of sexual aggression. An Englishman rapes a boy in the former (51), and Ammu is propositioned by her husband’s employer at the latter (41). Why does Roy invite a connection between plantation agriculture and the sexual exploitation of women and/or children? How are colonial attitudes to the environment related to these forms of sexual aggression?
• How does the novel show that human and environmental histories are inseparable? How do cultural beliefs and/or social practices impact the environment? How have these changed and/or not changed over time?

Assignment and Project Ideas:
• Literary Entomology: Ask students to describe and define one of the insects that appears and/or reappears in the novel, such as the “minute spider” that takes on special significance for Velutha & Ammu (320), or the millipede on the sole of the policemen’s boots that kick Velutha almost to death. How do these “small things” help us to understand the “big things” that the novel is about?
• Tourism: Examine the politics of contemporary tourism in more detail with your class. What are their experiences of being tourists? Who does tourism benefit? What are its drawbacks? Invite them to research tourism in Kerala online. Analyze the language and images used in materials such as those listed below. You might ask students to write their own brochure for the Heritage Hotel. You could pair these texts with excerpts from Antiguan writer Jamaica Kincaid’s short, but scathing account of Caribbean tourism, A Small Place (1988).
  • A review of rubber plantation guesthouses:  
  • http://www.keralatourism.com/
  • http://www.kerala.com/keralatourism/

Suggestions for expanding this unit:
A good way to expand this lesson would be to further explore Roy’s environmental activism, using the additional resources listed above and in Unit 3. As explained in the latter, she is a well-known opponent of the Narmada Dam Project, which she critiques in her essay “The Greater Common Good,” available online: http://www.narmada.org/gcg/gcg.html

The following quotation from the closing paragraph of this essay is an especially useful discussion prompt; the “intelligence” that Roy describes might usefully be compared to Vekutha’s “river-sense”:

Big Dams are to a Nation’s “Development” what Nuclear Bombs are to its Military Arsenal. They’re both weapons of mass destruction. They’re both weapons Governments use to control their own people. Both Twentieth Century emblems that mark a point in time when human intelligence has outstripped its own instinct for survival. They’re both malignant indications of civilization turning upon itself. They represent the severing of the link, not just the link - the understanding - between human beings and the planet they live on. They scramble the intelligence that connects eggs to hens, milk to cows, food to forests, water to rivers, air to life and the earth to human existence.