

Violent signs: Ecocritical perspectives in select novels of Arundhati Roy

Chayanika Roy

Assistant Professor, Department of English,
Mahadevananda Mahavidyalaya,
West Bengal State University, Kolkata-700120,
Email - payel.guharoy@gmail.com

Abstract: Contemporary Indian English fiction has undoubtedly created a space to explore the ecological paucity developed over time and mitigate its disastrous consequences imminent in future. Eco-literacy often sheds light on our awareness related to environment, sustainable living, and human-nature agreement. It includes indigenous knowledge and ecological cognizance underscoring on the local practices and beliefs that contributes towards a better understanding between nature and human. In recent times there has been a proclivity among Indian English writers to depict the hollowness extant in human nature and its precarious impact on natural resources like deforestation, rapid urbanization, industrialization, overconsumption and wastes, erosion, pollution etc. Indian English fiction employ literary devices and storytelling methods to attract attention to environmental issues, human-nature partnership, climate change and the aftermath of environmental degradation. The present paper seeks to explore the ecological cognizance as envisaged in the two contemporary novels by Arundhati Roy: *The God of Small Things* and *The Ministry of Utmost Importance*. These novels try to raise an alarm to the impending danger that seems to upset the ecological balance and break into the natural harmony jeopardising human lives.

Keywords: Ecology, Eco-literacy, Ecological, Ecocritical, Environment, Nature, Human, Degradation.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Nature has always been of utter significance to human beings providing a safe haven for the hapless creatures. Nature is omnipotent, has an overwhelming influence on our lives and development. After several years of exploitation people realised the mistakes, they have committed so far, and wish to amend this by making men aware of the imbecility they show by ruining their own habitat. Authors of recent times have been wise enough to expose the lacunae hiding inside human beings and invent ways to mitigate such exploitation and explosions. Indian English literature explores how issues related to nature disproportionately affect marginalised communities throwing light on the intersections between societal injustices, poverty, and ecological deterioration. Through their writings they advocate for sustainable living, renewable energy, conservation initiatives, waste management processes and urges the readers to take resort to eco-friendly practices to foster a healthier and harmonious living. Authors personify nature, rendering human attributes to natural processes, giving them a powerful voice and authority so that nature does not find itself only as a backdrop glorifying human at the front but participate actively in human affairs. Contemporary Indian English novels often underscore the cultural reverence for nature in local festivities, rituals, folklore, folk-songs highlighting the integral connections between culture, divinity, and environmental stewardship.

2. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY :

The objective of the present paper would be to explore the vacuum created inside nature which gets reverberated into the minds of humans, here the characters, and how they try to manipulate and negotiate their lives amidst this ecological crisis which further leads to social, cultural, economic, and spiritual cataclysm. In this connection I would like to throw light on two novels by Arundhati Roy: *The God of Small Things* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* which intricately explores the subtle degradation of natural resources by erratic human behaviour and ways to maintain delicate balance between the world and nature. Her novels touch upon significant ecological problems which are

precarious and anthropocene. If *The God of Small things* show rapid urbanization on the Kerala landscape, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* shows Delhi in its rubble. The methodology will be close reading of both the texts whereby the integral connection between the characters and the nature is brought about in a subtle yet profound manner each having a strong voice and authority to address its extermination.

In *The God of Small Things*, the twins Estha and Rahel witness and are affected by the depletion of the river which brings about a change in their native town Ayemenem. The contaminated water of the river stands as a metaphor for the deterioration of the natural world and its impact on the lives of the characters it flows through. The river reflects a sense of loss and disillusionment as a result of rapid exhaustion of the river bed and this dwindling of the river gets reflected in the lives of the characters the river is directly or indirectly related to. Once Estha and Rahel, accompanied by their relatives, went to receive Margaret, Chacko's former wife, and Sophie Mol, his daughter, and while they were in a hotel that night, they dreamt of "their river", Meenachal (122). Roy then goes to describe the river which is the connecting thread of their lives. River Meenachal "was warm... Grey green.... With fish in it. With the sky and trees in it. And at night, the broken yellow moon in it" (123). The river was filled up with fishes. The river was so pristine that the sky and the trees were reflected in it. Long time hence the author notes the depletion of the river expressed in her own words: "Years later, when Rahel returned to the river, it greeted her with a ghastly skull's smile, with holes where teeth had been, and a limp hand rose from a hospital bed." The river has a sick appearance now. And she adds, "It had shrunk" (124). Even the rains cannot bring back the original depth and width of the river. She says: "Despite the fact that it was June, and raining, the river was no more than a swollen drain now. A thin ribbon of thick water that lapped wearily at the mud banks on either side, sequined with the occasional silver slant of a dead fish. It was choked with a succulent weed, whose furred brown roots waved like thin tentacles under water. Bronze-winged lily-trotters walked across it. Splay-footed, cautious" (124). The river, which "had had the power to evoke fear," is now "a slow, sludging green ribbon lawn that ferried fetid garbage to the sea" (124). People defecating in open places contribute to polluting the river and on top of that industrial wastes, washing of clothes, bathing animals make it worse. The reckless misuse of natural resources by imbeciles like human beings turn the pristine nature into a dumping ground and endanger the living species. Population explosion is something which kills us every day slowly berefting us of our necessities. This detrimental condition of natural habitat is the outcome of rapid urbanization and over population. The estate of Karri Saipu known as History House is transformed into a hotel called Heritage. The neighbourhood is depicted as "God's Own Country" in hotel brochures. But this God's own country is described in appalling manner:

The view from the hotel was beautiful; but here too the water was thick and toxic. They had built a wall to the screen off slum and prevent it from encroaching on Karri Saipu's estate. There was not much they could do about the smell... they knew those clever Hotel people's poverty was merely a matter of getting used to it. (125-126)

Twenty-three years is a long gap to get things transformed fully and if it is nature, the change is all the more palpable not only to physical eyes but also to mental state as a very unfortunate incident of our life itself. Rahel returning after twenty-three years could feel the same change in his own place as Yeats felt in the poem "Wild swans at Coole" nineteen years later; "I have looked upon those brilliant creatures/ And now my heart is sore. / All's Changed since I..." (Yeats). Ammu, another prominent character of the novel struggles against oppressive social customs but her greater contestation is with environmental degradation. Her endeavour to fight the societal constraints reflects her fruitless attempt to safeguard her natural surroundings from the forces of industrialisation and urbanization. Baby Kochamma gave up her passion of gardening for watching TV when a dish antenna was newly installed. Twenty-three years ago, her obsession for gardening made her to pursue diploma in ornamental gardening. She planted a variety of flowering plants and trees which had very little chance to combat the extreme weather conditions of Ayemenem. She became a popular gardener and people from Kottayam thronged to visit her garden. But as the garden is left unpruned for many years the exotic plants are replaced by weeds called 'patcha.' "Like a lion-tamer she tamed twisted vines and nurtured bristling cacti, she limited bonsai plants and pampered rare orchids. She waged war on the weather. She tried to grow edelweiss and Chinese guava" (26-27). But after twenty-three years the same is shown as: "It has grown knotted and wild, like a circus whose animals had forgotten their tricks. The weed that people call communist *patcha* (because it flourished in Kerala like communism) smothers the more exotic plants" (27).

Velutha is the god of small things in the novel who makes "tiny wind mills, rattle, minute jewels boxes out of dried palm reeds; he could carve perfect boats out of tapioca stems and figurines on cashew nuts" (74). As an untouchable his marginalized stature can be compared to the oppression of nature and ecosystem. Pappachi with his moth collection and his legacy of abusive behaviour symbolizes the duality extant in human relations and nature. His fascination for moths and on the other hand his atrocious nature shows human's simultaneous inclination and disregard

for the natural habitat. Chacko's failure to run the pickle factory in his native place mirrors the vain attempt to sustain traditional practices in the face of modernization. Through this novel and through various characters Roy has tried to showcase the gradual depletion of nature in the face of rapid urbanization and over population. The ravages in nature are the result of relentless modern techniques employed by human beings to live as modern.

Another novel of Arundhati Roy that too calls for urgent natural recovery and eco-literacy is *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. The novel opens with a prologue which clearly shows the author's apprehension for the inferior and weak species. The unquenchable thirst of human beings has led to the death of 'white-baked vulture', the scavengers of dead and the dwindling of sparrows are due to environmental changes, "sparrow that have gone missing, and the old white-baked vultures, custodians of dead for more than a hundred years, that have been wiped out," (1). Arundhati Roy articulates the failure of the upliftment projects with ironic intonation: "rivers were bottled and sold in super market, fish were tinned, mountains mined and turned into shining missiles, massive dams lit up the cities like Christ-mass trees. Everyone was happy" (98). The author reiterates the dreary and dull look of modernisation where city's fringes are swamped with industrial wastes and "in the miles of bright swamp tightly compacted with refuse and colourful plastic bags... the air was chemical and the water poisonous. Clouds of mosquitoes rose up from thick green pond" (100). The city of Delhi with its historic past is personified as an old woman with "parchment skin," "wrinkle," "arthritic joint," "varicose veins," "withered tits," "aching feet," and "stiff old hips" (96). This novel too offers a nuanced perspective on the complex understanding between human and nature. Anjum, a transgender woman sets up her habitat in a graveyard and gradually transforms that into a vibrant and luscious garden. This action shows her determination and resilience to do something challenging in order to find perfect bliss in nature amidst societal constrictions and regressive policies. Her connection to the graveyard on one hand and her garden on the other shows the vicious link between life and death which one cannot deny or defy. The hijra community in general finds themselves intrinsically connected to nature. They try to build sanctuary in the abandoned spaces of the city and build their own sustainable community living on the edges. The novelist tries to depict the depth of understanding of nature that these people have amidst several restrictions from the society which make them profound and elevated as human beings in comparison to so called heterosexuals. Tilo, another character from the novel finds herself deeply connected to the forests of Kashmir after her close association with a Kashmiri freedom fighter, Musa. This connection adds a political as well as an environmental dimension to the narrative. The impact of militarization on the natural resources of Kashmir creates a conflict between nature and culture and Tilo's relationship with Musa gives them abundant space to understand the ecological paucity built in the face of militarization and save nature from political underlings. The activism in the story is not only against political injustices and societal constrictions but also a greater commitment towards preservation of nature and upliftment of human nature. The misshapen state of Delhi Zoo is telescoped realistically by Roy in the voice of Tilottama. The zoo authorities do not care for the health of animals. The cages are kept empty, and the crowd often jammed and choked by people teasing the animals for entertainment hardly catches the authorities' eyes. In the zoo the Gibbon hung to the tree because its cage was littered and the hippo swam in a dirty pond. The hapless condition of the zoo enunciates the repeated torture nature faces from mankind in the garb of modernization and upliftment.

3. CONCLUSION:

The legacy of environmental narratives has been repeatedly revived by Indian writers such as Raja Rao, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai. These authors often portray the intrinsic and complex relationship between nature and humans. They have frequently expressed their views regarding the encroachment of cities into the natural spaces leading to clogging of the natural habitats. It can correctly be concluded that environment is not only an idea, a notion, deep imbedded in the minds but a nucleus of national development. Thus, an emerging nation with a strong ideological base, needs to be formulated in a manner which becomes conducive for growth of nature and human nature. Roy's novels offer rich and sublime resources for ecocritical perspectives exposing the innate and complex connections between human actions and the ecological environment. Through her elaborate articulation she implores the readers to reflect on the impact of society's choices in the natural world and asks for a deeper understanding of ecological interdependence and the urgency for sustainable coexistence. Roy asks her readers to embrace more eco-friendly means to save nature from the atrocious actions of reckless human beings for a holistic and harmonious living.

REFERENCES:

Journal Papers:

1. Ekramul Hassan, Mohammad. "Ecocriticism in Arundhati Roy's Novel *The God of Small Things*." *Express, An International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*, vol. 1, issue. 10, 2014.
2. Maral, Priyanka. "Ecocriticism in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*." *IOSR, Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, vol. 10, issue. 4, 2013, pp 40-42.
3. Mary Francis, Deepa and M. Thangaraj. "Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* From An Ecocritical Viewpoint." *International Journal of Research in Humanities, Arts and Literature*, vol. 4, issue. 8, 2016, pp 75-82.
4. Mishra, Gaurav. "A Postcolonial Ecocritical Study of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*." *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR)*, vol. 5, issue. 1, 2023, pp 1-5.
5. Mandal, Supriya. "An Analysis from the Perspectives of Postcolonial Ecocriticism of Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*." *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*, vol. 9, issue. I, 2018.
6. Mohsin, Dr. Syed Wahaj. "Environmental Concerns in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness: A Study*." *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*, vol. 8, issue. 6, 2017.
7. Pradip Marotirao, Raibhole. "A Study on Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*." *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research (JETIR)*, vol. 10, issue. 1, 2023.

Books:

8. Roy, Arundhati. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Penguin Random House, 2017.
9. Roy, Arundhati. *The God of Small Things*, Penguin, 2002.