AN ECOCRITICAL STUDY OF THE WRITINGS OF ARUNDHATI ROY

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Abstract: Environment is a part and parcel of our life. We can’t exist without it. But now-a-days it is among the most neglected things. The global environmental crisis led the conscious artists to present their concerns on the issues related with environment in their writings to awaken people for being eco-friendly. They began to present study and analysis of the strong bond between nature and society. Ecology and eco-criticism are the significant aspects for the literary study and research. Ecological or environmental study is the centre of attraction for literary personalities as well as the need of time. People are becoming conscious about the environment. Environmental balance is very important in this globalized world. Many steps have been taken for stopping environmental pollutions. Some writers could not keep their eyes shut on this critical issue which is related with the future and existence of humanity. One such Big name is Arundhati Roy who could not keep mum on such a ‘small thing’ like environment and she raised this issue through her fictional as well as non-fictional writings. She has made us aware of the deteriorating condition of our environment. This paper presents an ecocritical study of her fictional as well as non-fictional writings.

Keynote: Environment, Deforestation, Nuclear War, Flood, Dams, Irrigation, River.

Richard Kerridge in his critical paper Environmentalism and Ecocriticism writes that “Ecocriticism is literary and cultural criticism from an environmentalist viewpoint. Texts are evaluated in terms of their environmentally harmful or helpful effects” (Waugh 530). In critical term Ecocriticism is used for “[T]he study of literary texts with reference to the interaction between human activity and the vast range of ‘natural or non-human phenomena which bears upon human experience- encompassing (amongst many things) issues concerning fauna, flora, landscape, environment and weather” (Childs 65). From these two critical definitions we may infer that Ecocriticism is a study of such texts which evaluate the harmful or helpful effects of the interaction between man and nature or non-human phenomena.

Most eco-critical works shares a common motivation: the troubling awareness that we have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet’s basic life support systems. Compelled by the idea of saving the environment from total chaos, a number of creative writers of last two decades, made it a point to deal with nature as an important entity in their literary text. When these texts are studied from eco-critical perspective, the reader finds the inner-relatedness of all factors within the eco-system like social, political and phenomenon of natural world. Even the physical setting in the plot of literary text plays an important role in the total understanding of its meaning.

Arundhati Roy stormed the literary world with her debut novel The God of Small Things in 1997 which brought her name, fame and worldwide recognition with the Booker Prize. After this she engrossed in non-fictional writings like The End of Imagination, The Greater Commongood, The Algebra of Infinite Justice, and so on. Environment is also among one of the ‘Small Things’ Arundhati Roy has fought for through her social activism and literary writings. She is not such an intellectual preaching nice things from ivory towers. She has shown her serious consciousness by joining like-minded people on vital issues related to environment. She speaks on the explosion of Nuclear Bomb and Dams, canals and about the threats to wild-life. Environment is among those ‘small things’ Arundhati Roy is deeply concerned about. Her approach is not confined to writing for the environment; she is deeply involved with the agitations concerned with environmental issues like Narmada Bachao Andolan and The Campaign against Nuclear Weapons in India. So, it is worthwhile to examine her views on environment in this respect. In this critical paper Roy’s views on environment will be studied in the light of her fiction and non-fictional writings because socially aware intellectuals cannot disregard the environment in the modern world.
There are some important facts related with environment. Forest, water and wild-life—these three are important factor which come under the topic ‘environment’ and need to be discussed in short to understand the clear picture of environment of today we are living in. As we know forests are essential for healthy environment. In the modern social sphere environment cannot be overlooked because it plays a vital role in the formation of a healthier atmosphere for the human beings. But with the progress of human beings and rapid growth of development and urbanisation of rural areas have led to the way for deforestation which has become a threat to humanity and wild-life too. Deforestation causes soil erosion, floods and drought too. Urbanization and industrialization have accelerated the progress. Naturally the roles of forests as ecosystems are affected, forest dependent communities are suffering. Ground water scarcity, flash floods, shrinking rivers and streams, uncertain rains, soil and nutrition loss, eutrophication of water bodies, growing desertification have become common problems of today. So forests must be protected and expanded.

Fresh water is very essential for us because we require it for the most of our needs. About 83% of available fresh water in India is used for irrigation. The rest 175 meets the demand of domestic, industrial and other sectors. Where rivers or lakes are not present the ground water sources meet the demand. Many of the cities and metropolitan cities in India are facing the problem of water scarcity. Moreover, plastics and polythene bags are thrown away in river and canal which cause pollution and stops it flow. Sometimes it jams the canals beside roads and the water of the sewage flows on open roads smelling badly which affects our health. We need to rethink on our water policy and find viable solutions.

Wild-life is an important asset for a country. Their presence helps in keeping the forest eco-systems in healthy condition. Indian wild-life is much more important on account of high biodiversity and above all their touristic value. Poaching of elephants has been taking place in different areas for ivory. In recent years large numbers of elephants have been killed in train accidents. Reports suggest that dozens of elephants have died in recent past while crossing railway tracks which pass through National Parks and forests.

Arundhati Roy is an activist with a social vision which is in the best interest of humanity. Her outlook on the nuclear proliferation, the dams and on the other aspects of environment may be studied through her fictional and non-fictional writings. Her novel, The God of Small Things, (hereafter the name of the novel is referred to as TGOST in abridged form in quotations) abounds in many examples which show her concern about environment. The very first chapter of the novel displays the novelist’s concern for environment. She mentions it when Estha “walked along the banks of the river that smelled of shit, pesticides bought with World Bank loans. Most of the fish had died. The ones that survived suffered from fin-rot and had broken out in boils” (TGOST 13). Arundhati is here critical of the hands behind polluting the river and the policy of the government buying pesticides with World Bank, both of which will ultimately contribute in making the life of the people miserable. The next picture she presents is of the polluted river in the fifth chapter where God’s Own Country gets notoriety of children defecating directly onto the riverbed. “The river would rouse itself to accept the day’s offerings and sludge off to the sea, leaving wavy lines of thick white scum in its wake” (TGOST125). Thus shit and pesticides are the two sources of pollution mentioned above. Children living in the hutments on the other side defecating on the riverbed are responsible for shit. The water of the river is used for washing clothes and pots too upstream and receives “unadulterated factory effluents” as well. The condition of rivers which had once the power to evoke fear has become a narrow lane due to the pollutants. The condition of river is presented so aptly:

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, sequinned with the occasional silver slant of dead fish. ……

Once it had the power to evoke fear. To change lives. But now its teeth were drawn, its spirit spent. It was just a slow, sludging green ribbon lawn that ferried fetid garbage to the sea. Bright plastic bags blew its viscous, weedy surface like subtropical flying-flowers (TGOST 124).

When Rahel returned to the river after a gap of so many years what greeted her was a river “with ghastly skull’s smile, with holes where teeth had been and a limp hand raised from a hospital bed” (TGOST 124).

Once the village Ayemenem was known for its freshness and matchless greenery but when Rahel returns to it the rural quietness has changed. The population of the village, Ayemenem, has “swelled to the size of a little town.” There is only a “fragile facade of greenery” left now and only the houses nestled under trees along unmotorable narrow paths that branch off the main road give the village “a semblance of rural quietness.” Estha observes “the new, freshly baked, iced, Gulf-money houses built by nurses, masons, wire benders and bank clerks who worked hard and unhappily in a faraway places” (TGOST 13). The roads are not in a good condition as there “small fish appear in the puddles that fill the PWD potholes on the highways” (TGOST 1). The History House has
changed too. It has been converted into a hotel. The locality is described as ‘God’s Own Country’ in hotel brochures. But the reality is beyond imagination:

The view from the hotel was beautiful, but here too the water was thick and toxic. No Swimming signs had been put up in stylish calligraphy. They had built a wall to screen off the slum and prevent it from encroaching on Kari Saipu’s estate. There wasn’t much they could do about the smell. (TGOST 125).

Thus, money is being earned from the hotel but attention towards local hygienic is not paid due to utter selfishness and self-centredness.

The Ayemenem House has become too old with times as it has been a witness of the ups and downs of the five generations of the Ipe family. Rahel sees the degeneration of the reputed “grand old house” and finds it in a very miserable condition. Further, in the third chapter we are informed of the same type of degenerating condition that has taken place in the Ayemenem House:

Filth had laid siege to the Ayemenem House like a medieval army advancing on an enemy castle. It clotted every crevice and clung to the window panes.

Midges whizzed in teapots. Dead insects lay in empty vases.

(TGOST 88).

The novel The God of Small Things, in this way, consists of many examples which show the environmental decay and degeneration. As we know Arundhati is a social activist, so she could not resist herself from dissenting on some issues which were related with the common interests of the masses. She criticized vehemently on the nuclear policy of the government when India tested its nuclear capability at Pokharan on May 11, 1998. She joined a seminar held on the Hiroshima Day and there she presented a paper which was published in the Outlook, dated August 3, 1998 under the title of The End of Imagination. This seminar was focussed on the increasing dangers of the nuclear-weaponization especially in the context of nuclear tests by India and Pakistan in May-June, 1998. Later, this paper was published and included in the non-fictional book, The Algebra of Infinite Justice.

The End of Imagination is the inaugural essay of Arundhati’s non-fictional phase of her writings. It is an emotional outburst of overwhelming thought and emotion, and also reopens the perennial debate on the artiste’s responsibility to society. Arundhati has undertaken the task of measuring the enormous social cost of nuclear weaponry and its horrific consequences. The writer is afraid of the consequences of the hoardings of nuclear-weaponry in India and Pakistan. She tells us that nuclear war is not just a war in which “countries battle countries and men battle men” (Algebra 5). The worst danger today humanity is suffering from is the radioactivity caused by exploding atomic bombs which pollute air, water and soil and its effects are seen for the very long time. It destroys the genetic quality and causes disease like leukaemia, bone tumour and infant mortality. The latest example is Hiroshima which was bombed by America during the Second World War in 1945. The effects of this bombing are felt even today. The author observes:

If there is a nuclear war, our foes will not be China or America or even each other. Our foes will be the earth herself. The very elements—the sky, the air, the land, the wind and water—will all turn against us. Their wrath will be terrible (Algebra 5-6).

She presents a very tethering picture of the consequences of the nuclear war:

Our cities and forests, our fields and villages will burn for days. Rivers will turn to poison. The air will become fire. The wind will spread the flames..........................

What shall we do then, those of us who are still alive? Burned and blind and bald and ill, carrying the cancerous carcasses of our children in our arms, where shall we go? What shall we eat? What shall we drink? What shall we breathe? (Algebra 6).

The issue dealt above by the writer is not a matter of fiction, but it is a profound reality. The effects of radioactive fallout to contaminate our environment and make it inhabitable for living beings cannot be doubted by anybody who cares to know and think. Therefore, the questions raised by Arundhati Roy compel us to think the relevance and necessity of amassing nuclear weaponry.

The author mocks at the suggestions of some of the medical specialists of taking iodine pills, remaining indoors, consuming only stored water and food and avoiding milk. These are obviously impracticable steps and fanciful solutions that border on lunacy. She severely criticizes the theory of deterrence and observes a number of loopholes and fundamental flaws in it. The flaw number one is that “it assumes that what deters you (the fear of annihilation) will deter them. What about those who are not deterred by that? The suicide bomber psyche—the
‘We’ll take you with us’ school—is that an outlandish thought?” (Algebra: 8). The second major flaw in the Theory of Deterrence, points out Arundhati Roy, is that Deterrence is primarily based on an over-riding sense of fear; but fear about the scale and extent of devastation of nuclear warfare can emerge only if people are knowledgeable about and conscious of it and also have the grit and courage to openly denounce it. Unfortunately, the widespread ignorance due to high percentage of illiteracy in India and Pakistan precludes any mass movement against the nuclearization of these poor nations of the Third World. On the other hand vote bank conscious politicians succeed in creating a hysteric euphoria which is nick-named ‘patriotic fervour’ or ‘national pride’. When there is such upsurge of emotions, the first obvious casualty will be ‘deterrence.’ That is why, according to Arundhati Roy, “The theory of Deterrence is nothing but a perilous joke in a world where iodine pills are prescribed as a prophylactic for nuclear irradiation” (Algebra 9-10). Arundhati’s concern for humanity let her protest the nuclear bomb. She says:

If protesting against having a nuclear bomb implanted in my brain is anti-Hindu and anti-national, then I secede. I hereby declare myself an independent, mobile republic. I am a citizen of the earth. I own no territory. I have no flag. I’m female, and have nothing against eunuchs. My policies are simple. I’m willing to sign any nuclear non-proliferation treaty or nuclear test ban treaty that’s going. Immigrants are welcome (Algebra: 21).

Arundhati declares herself as an independent republic of the earth. The whole earth is hers and she is of the whole earth. Such a vast outlook she embraces! She loves this world. She says emotionally “it was a world that I myself have criticized unsparingly, but only because I loved it. It didn’t deserve to die. It didn’t deserve to be dismembered” (Algebra 21).

Now, she discusses the expediency of nuclear armament around the world. She provides three obvious reasons of it: China, Pakistan and Exposing Western Hypocrisy. She analyses all the three reasons and says that the war with China is several decades old while the war with Pakistan was fought twenty-seven years ago. Though Kashmir is the apple of discord between the two nations-India and Pakistan, and the issue cannot be solved even by pointing nuclear missiles at Pakistan:

Though we are separate countries, we share skies, we share winds, we share water. Where radioactive fallout will land on any given day depends on the direction of the wind and rain. Lahore and Amritsar are thirty miles apart. If we bomb Lahore, Punjab will burn. If we bomb Karachi, then Gujarat and Rajasthan, perhaps even Bombay, will burn. Any nuclear war with Pakistan will be a war against ourselves (Algebra 24).

Arundhati Roy’s next important essay is The Greater Common Good which shows her concern about the building of dams which is related with her environmental consciousness too. The Greater Common Good is an essay wherein Roy scrutinises the controversial scenario of dams, particularly the Narmada Valley Project. Roy sets the ground for discussion about the public perception regarding the fight against Sardar Sarovar Dam. The essay “deals with the author's rational and progressive attitude to the dam projects of the government; her sympathetic talks with the sufferers of the Narmada Valley Project; her harsh and rugged satire on the faulty decision and adverse attitude of the political parties and above all, her Wordsworthian nostalgia for the natural scenes and sights of nature” (Prasad 17).

Arundhati expresses her anguish on the matter of the statistics that the government does not care for the number of people being displaced due to the building of dams while any information or data may be obtained easily from any corner of the world in these days. “According to a detailed-study of fifty-four Large Dams done by the Indian Institute of Public Administration, the average number of people displaced by a Large Dam in India is 44,182” (Algebra 60). There are 3,300 large dams in India. So it is easy to imagine how many millions of people have been displaced due to these Large Dams after Independence.

Arundhati Roy is aware of the fact that the building of big dams in the Narmada valley will affect adversely to the environment as well as it will definitely bring misery to many. She does not want to problematise the Narmada Valley Project based on an anti-dam philosophy, but is outspoken in the exposition of the conflicts that she finds inherent in the project: “And if there’s no surfeit, you’re left with an empty dam. And this defeats the purpose of irrigation, which is to store the monsoon water. It’s like the conundrum of trying to ford a river with a fox, a chicken and a bag of grain” (Algebra 83). The following passage about the Narmada valley project presents Roy’s stance to suggest her eco-consciousness very well:
It will alter the ecology of the entire river basin of one of India’s biggest rivers. For better or for worse, it will affect the lives of twenty-five million people who live in the valley. It will submerge and destroy 4.000 square kilometre of natural deciduous forest. Yet, even before the Ministry of Environment cleared the project, the World Bank offered to finance the linchpin of the project—the Sardar Sarovar dam, whose reservoir displaces people in Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, but whose benefits go to Gujarat. The Bank was ready with its chequebook before anybody had any idea of what the human cost or the environmental effect of the dam would be! (Algebra 75-76).

Roy tells us that the impact of the Narmada valley project on environment and the people living along the valley is already severe. “Around the dam site and the nearby villages, the number of cases of malaria has increased six-fold” (Algebra 100). Several kilometres upstream from the Sardar Sarovar Dam, huge deposits of silts have cut off access to the river and it compels women carrying water to walk miles to find a negotiable point. Cows and goats are getting stranded in the mud and are dying. Further upstream, where silt has not become a problem, and when the river recedes in the dry months, the landless people (Adivasis and Dalits) cultivate rice, melons, cucumbers and gourds on the rich, shallow silt banks. But their fate does not allow them to reap their crop because the water from the Bargi dam is released without any warning every now and then and thus washing away their crops and making them helpless and without any livelihood.

Throwing light on the purpose of a dam Arundhati makes it clear that its purpose “is to store monsoon water in its reservoir and then use it judiciously for the rest of the year, distributing it across dry lands through a system of canals” (Algebra 120). But the question is how the land to be irrigated through canals will react which is accustomed only to seasonal irrigation and its entire ecology is designed for that single pulse of monsoon rain. She informs and explores our widely held notions about the benefits of canal irrigation: “Perennial irrigation does to soil roughly what anabolic steroids do to the human body. Steroids can turn an ordinary athlete into an Olympic medal-winner; perennial irrigation can convert soil which produced only a single crop a year, into soil that yields several crops a year” (Algebra 120). But soon she mentions its after-effects that the soil “becomes too poor to support the extra demands made on it. Gradually in the way a steroid-using athlete becomes an invalid, the soil becomes depleted and degraded, and agricultural yields begin to decrease” (Algebra 121). Then she reveals the fact that “land irrigated by well water is today almost twice productive as land irrigated by canals” (Algebra 121) and when water moves up through the soil, it absorbs salts. Ultimately the salt is concentrated into soil causing toxic to plant life. Arundhati informs about a ‘secret’ Government studies which tells that “more than fifty-two per cent of the Sardar Sarovar command area is prone to waterlogging and salinization” (Algebra 122). As canals block the flow of the natural, seasonal water and lead to waterlogging, it becomes necessary to build an alternate, artificial drainage system that is built in conjunction with the canals. But it is too expensive. This cost of drainage is not included in the projects because “it costs five times as much to provide adequate drainage as it does to irrigate the same amount of land. It makes the cost of a complete Project appear unviable” (Algebra 123). The World Bank’s solution of the problem is to put in the irrigation system and let salinity and waterlogging be set in. Then all the land will be devastated and once again a fresh loan will be sought from the Bank.

As all of us know water is an important source of irrigation and power necessary for the agricultural growth and industrial production of the country. Water is channelized for irrigation of agricultural fields. It is controlled by means of dams to produce hydro-electricity. These projects are the media for supplying power to the industries, water to agriculture and electricity to villages and cities for better living. The Government says that Sardar Sarovar Projects which purposes are multiple—irrigation, power production and flood control, will produce 1450 Mega Watts of power. But, according to Roy, the fact is just opposite. She says:

Irrigation uses up the water you need to produce power. Flood control requires you to keep the reservoir empty during the monsoon months to deal with an anticipated surplus of water. And if there’s no surplus, you’re left with an empty dam. And this defeats the purpose of irrigation, which is to store the monsoon water. It’s like the conundrum of trying to ford a river with a fox, a chicken and a bag of grain. The result of these mutually conflicting aims, studies say, is that when the Sardar Sarovar Projects are completed and the scheme is fully functional, it will end up producing only three per cent of the power that its planners say it will. About fifty megawatts (Algebra 83).

Arundhati says that Big Dams and Nuclear Bombs are weapons of mass destruction the government use to control their people. But it is ironical that one billion people in the world have no safe drinking water and 855 million live in rural areas. Roy tells us that it will cost to install energy-intensive networks of thousands of kilometres of pipelines, aqueducts, pumps and water treatment plants to provide safe drinking water to the rural
populations. This will not be done due to its heavy cost. But the building of dams will go on. But nobody builds
dam to provide safe drinking water to rural people.

Arundhati Roy disapproves the building of the dams in terms of human suffering too. The dams displace
people from its native regions and the governments do not resettle them properly. Roy goes deep in the history
of the origination of Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA). When Medha Patkar understood the problems of the people
to be displaced, her chief concern was that displaced villagers should be resettled in an equitable, humane way.
Gradually she understood that government’s approach to this problem was far from honourable. Then by 1986,
various organizations in each state began to question the promises about the resettlement and rehabilitation
programmes.

Roy presents the study of the numbers of the displaced due to building of dams. According to an unofficial
data, she mentions the data of the displaced people as fifty million. But she regrets that no one knows and cares for
them. “What has happened to all these millions people? Where are they now? How do they earn a living?”
(Algebra 63). Millions of displaced people in India are helpless to live a life of a refugee in an unacknowledged
war. Roy then tells us that resettlement has been done by governments but in practice, the resettlement story
continues to be one of callousness and broken promises. People were dumped in rows of corrugated tin sheds that
are extremely hot in summer and extremely cold in winter. Some of them were located in dry river beds that,
during the monsoon, turn into fast-flowing drifts. The monsoon welcomes them with flood and they have to face
the after-effects of the flood:

When the waters recede they leave ruin. Malaria, diarrhoea. Sick cattle stranded in the slush.
The ancient teak beams dismantled from their previous homes, carefully stacked away like
postponed dreams, now spongy, rotten and unusable (Algebra 104-105).

The displaced persons, mostly tribals and dalits, have lost their forest from which they gathered everything
they needed, their river and their livestock which fulfilled basic needs of them. All these natural surroundings
have been snatched from them and they have become destitute and earning their livelihood as wage-labourers.

Thus, we find that Arundhati Roy has awakened the common mass through her fiction and nonfiction both.
She has delineated the various failures and contradictions, tried hard to ground the reader’s perception in reality.
Her eco-consciousness leads her to think for the well-being of the world, her views are not limited to any region of
the world but to the whole of it. Her views are that if nuclear bombs pose the sudden destruction, dams are
insidiously disrupting the ecological balance.

Arundhati champions for the cause of peace and prosperity, harmony and integration. Her motto is: “To love.
To be loved. To never forget your own insignificance” (Algebra 16). She discourages the making of bombs and
seeks “the beauty yet in this brutal, damaged world of ours. Hidden, fierce, immense. Beauty that is uniquely ours
and beauty that we have received with grace from others, enhanced, reinvented and made our own. We have to
seek it out, nurture it, love it” (Algebra 38). She is a modern thinker who subscribes to the view that a modern man
or a modern society cannot live and prosper without being environment-friendly. Therefore, she pleads for nuclear-
free and pollution-free environment. She wants the wild-life and vegetation must be protected and nothing that
disturbs the ecological order and contaminate our soil, air and water should be permitted to continue.

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