

The Theme of Environment in Arundhati Roy's The Ministry of Utmost Happiness

Dr. Anuradha D. Kherdekar

Associate Professor, Dept. of English
Dhanwate National College, Nagpur, Maharashtra

Abstract

Arundhati Roy born in 1961 is an eminent Indian writer. She achieved fame after winning the Man Booker Prize in 1997 for her debut Novel the God of Small Things (1997). Her recent novel The Ministry of Utmost Happiness (2017) is a fictional masterpiece.

This paper attempts to study environmental concerns discussed by Arundhati Roy in the Ministry of Utmost Happiness. Issues ranging from Indian vultures crises, deforestation, dismal condition of migrants and quarry workers, predicament of captivated zoo animals, deficient health facilities, scum-laden rivers, mushrooming slums, mounting poverty, speedily increasing dumping grounds, unplanned urbanization and enslavement of Adivasi (Tribal) girl have been comprehensively studied. She writes to inspire action and encourage her readers to participate in the process of nation building and for creating a more sustainable planet.

Keywords : environment, happiness, urbanisation

Arundhati Roy is both reformative as well as rebellious Indian female writer. Her novels are intricately designed and richly layered with a generous amount of thematic concerns, symbolisms, well-crafted characters and meticulously architecture plot. Her latest novel The Ministry of Utmost Happiness (2017), travels beyond the conventional storytelling. This novel is neither a political treatise nor a journalistic report that condenses the facts about life in India. On the other hand this novel explores the societal dimensions and the political sphere with curiosity so as to provide the readers with whole some realities. The narrative of Roy is deeply informed, seamlessly woven, pragmatic and judicious.

Arundhati Roy is a zealous and internationally recognized environmental activist. She won Man Booker Prize for her debut novel The God of Small Things that was published in the year 1997. As an ardent writer of non-fiction Roy is engaged in various socio-political issues of consequence. Her literary activism is factual, naturalistic, provocative and unbiased.

Arundhati Roy has penned her concern regarding innumerable issues that called for public attention. Some such issues include rising tide of globalization, the hazards of consumerisms, Kashmir insurgency, the Maoist struggle and the rapidly revolving force of Indian democracy.

Her notable not-fictional works include *The End of Imagination* (1998), *The Cost of Living* (1999), *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* (2002), *Power Politics* (2002) *War Talk* (2003), *Public Power in the Age of Empire* (2004), *Listening to Grasshoppers : Field Notes on Democracy* (2010), *Kashmir : The case of Freedom* (2011) and *capitalism : A Ghost Story* (2014). Contemporary Indian Writing in English has waged a war on totality of expression and on the Eurocentric hegemony with a renewed sense of pride. New narrative techniques are being evolved to counter the literary dormancy.

The Indian writing in English is an outcome of the counter culture that came into play as a past colonial narrative strategy. The method of subversion has permeated the genre of fiction writing in India to such an extent that writers like Arundhati Roy, Arvind Adiga, Suketu Mehta, Amitav Ghosh and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni do not hesitate in experimenting literary strategies.

Literary works of Arundhati Roy contributed to the cult of environmental writing. The global environmental challenges have drawn her attention and provided her writings with an uncompromising spirit. The epigraph attached to *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* reads To, the Un consoled: The Mood of the writer resonates in the epigraph where she acknowledges the presence of those who are unconsolated. Though the readers are not aware of the identity of these unconsolated people, yet their presence is dominant one. As the narrative progresses the prologue to the novel provides as glimpse of the author's inclinations and concerns. The graphic detailing of the prologue is poetic and thoughtful.

“at magic hour”, tells Roy, as though beginning a fairy-tale, However, the fantastic imagery of the magic hour takes a sharp turn with the introduction of flying foxes and crows, Banyan trees and the old graveyard. All images that are in contradiction to the initial fairy-tale opening. There is a binary opposition between magical charm of the opening line and stark realities that follow. It must be therefore noted that this novel has no element of magic realism. In water stones interview held on 5th June 2017, Arundhati Roy emphatically asserts that the creatures and characters that populate her novel are not magical. All the images that

appear are neither magical nor metaphorical but true. The attention then moves to the latter half of the prologue. The unsatiated appetite of human has led to the extinction of the white-backed vultures and sparrows. The Vultures are natural scavengers and feed on dead flesh. However, as the prologue tells the vultures have died of diclofenac intoxication. The veterinary administration of diclofenac as a muscle relaxant in cows and buffaloes to enhance dairy production has led to the large scale death of white-rumped vultures. The vultures populated Indian forests and helped in the process of sanitation by consuming the carcasses of dead animals. The actual cause behind the falling number of vultures was found by Doctor Lind say oak and his team mates in the year 2003. In the year 2000 the alarming death rate of white-rumped vultures caused the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) to add this species to their Red List that enlisted critically endangered species. Thus a critical environmental issue has been brought to focus by Arundhati Roy.

The focus of the writer then travels across the cityscape. The setting in the novel is of Delhi, the capital of India. Roy's panoramic description of the city throws light on her literary ingenuity. The city of Delhi with its historic past is personified as an old woman with "parchment skin", "wrinkles", "arthritic joint", "varicose veins" and "aching feet". The timeline in the novel extends from post-independent India till present decade.

Globalization has engulfed the country and in its sway the process of deforestation has started giving rise to construction of skyscrapers and factories. The selling of processed food, canned food and mineral water has come in vogue along with construction of massive dams across India. The business magnates and ruling politicians did not recognize the corroding impact that deforestation, processed food and mineral water had on Indian environment and health.

The rivers shrank, the trees fell and the environment around us has harmed with ease. Another noticeable happening was the banning of surplus people "Away from the lights and advertisements, villages were emptied. Cities too Millions of people were being moved, but nobody knew where to" (98) asserts the narrator.

The city crumbled under the pressure of ultra-modernization. Traffic multiplied posing serious issues. The poor were evicted away from the opulent settlements were pushed to the periphery of the city. The narrator observes that, "On the city's industrial outskirts, in the miles of bright swamp tightly compacted with refuse and colourful plastic bags, where the evicted had been 're-settled', the air was chemical and the water poisonous. Clouds of

mosquitoes rose from thick green ponds”(100). The societal framework headed toward the creation of an unstable structure with two classes, the haves and the have-nots. The middle class began to wither gradually.

Major increase in urban population was observed. The cities spread territorially turning farmlands and rural areas into hubs of cemented cubical called hours. Real estate flourished under the project of urbanization as apartment culture. Urbanization gave deep roots to marginalization of the less privileged people and rise of ghettos. In current journalistic report by Abhirup Bhunia for the wire titled, India's Unplanned Urbanization is far from 'Smart', it is clearly affirmed that 404 million people will be added to the urban population between 2014 and 2050. According to the report, The Socio spatial hierarchy in the country's ever expanding cities is growing deeper, even as inequalities of income, access and opportunities remain unarrested. Marginalisation and ghettoization remains appealingly common place in Indian cities". (n.pag.) Rapid growing in urban population has led to a major rift in society by increasing the number of deprived people. The scenario may end up in destructive class wars.

Biplab's nostalgia resonates with regret for loss of community life and friendly neighbourhoods that formed an essential part of Indian society. Similar moving over loss of community life seen in the novels of Toni Morrison, particularly in her second novel 'Sula' (1972) the sub webs have devoured the bonds of kinship and the spirit of community life.

The next blow to the environment as printed by Arundhati Roy in the novel is by means of massive dams. The narrator states that, "Massive dams lit up the cities like Christmas Trees. Everyone was happy".(98) These dams promised production of massive hydropower, water for human consumption, irrigation but in the process they ruined the ecological river system, harmed the aquatic life and did not provide sufficient water to farmers. The people who are commanded to evacuate the land for construction of dams are often forsaken by the authorities who are supposed to rehabilitate them. The hazardous impact of dams ignited the 'Narmada Bachao Andolan' (NBA) headed by social activists Madhya Pradesh and Baba Amte, Roy participated in this andolan (movement) and donated her Booker Prize money for the same. She also appeared in Drowned out (2000) a documentary by F. Armstrong about Sardar Sarovar Project.

The impact of such magnanimous constructions on common people who are forced to relocate to other remote regions cannot be calculated by those who have never confronted

such atrocities in the name of progress. A minor character in the novel called Gulabiya Vechania who guarded the billboard at JantarMantar describes graphically the reality behind massive dam construction and its aftermath through his dreams. The dream of one man reflects the reality of multitudes.

Arundhati Roy takes up the issue of quarry workers by articulating her concern through the mouthpiece of a major female character in the novel known as S. Tilottams, an unconventional and defiant architect.

She wishes to “un-know” certain facts about the death caused by stone-dust due to which the victim’s lungs “refused to be cremated”.(258) The quarry workers cope with life threatening conditions at work and often die of silicosis. In similar way Roy throws light on the misery of migrant workers. These people are homeless and often forced to sleep on pavement. They are routinely crushed to death by reckless drivers. The city has nothing to offer these hard working people other than daily challenges for survival and an easy death. Human trafficking is a ruthless trend. The horrors involved in this trade cannot be easily documented. Impoverished tribal people are coerced by shrewd agents to send their children (female) to metropolises for sake of better livelihood. These tribal girls are then forced into flesh trade, organ trafficking, slavery by despotic agents who lure them to cities. The condition of Delhi zoo is telescoped realistically by Roy in the voice of Tilottama. The welfare of the animals is not a priority for zoo authorities. No veterinary care is administered, the cages are empty, and the crowd is not checked for teasing animals or for feeding them harmful things. The animals are tortured for cheap entertainment by the novel does not serve an asylum for the animals. This shows the grim picture of the zoo and of its inhabitants.

Another issue of significance described in this novel is related to the genetic modification of animals. This process is scientifically called Transgenes. The genetically modified trout called the mutant trout has more flesh. Similarly the genetically modified big has a huge body. It is doubled muscled pig that created big mutating the myostatin gene (MSTN). The ethical side of such experimentation has been questioned by the writer. She also draws attention towards the advancements in poultry industry. This clearly unveils the cruelty to which the animals are subjected in the name of scientific progress.

The writer then travels across the city reaching a massive dumping ground. This dumping grounds have no waste recycling units to manage waste and the garbage keeps smoldering

due to emission of methane from decaying waste product which are really harmful to environment and human health.

Next in the novel the condition of the ailing population is described. The poor sanitation facilities coupled with deteriorating environmental conditions caused wide spread illness and elevated the mortality rate. The state authorities play a vital role in neglecting this undesired misery.

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* the presence of the unconsolated is overwhelming. Every heart wrenching account in the narrative leads to unconsolated and suffering people. The unconsolated are those who bear the brunt of environmental degradation. They are those whose agony is the by product of socio-political turmoil. Arundhati Roy tries to achieve collective well being fabric of her narrative with precision. Many contemporary writers like Nimita Desai, Amitav Ghose and Kiran Desai always the relationship between nature and humans. They have frequently expressed their views regarding the exploitation of nature.

Conclusion :

Environment is not only a concept but it is the nucleus of national development. Thus an evolving ideology based on reason and experience needs to be formulated for improving the conditions of the environment.

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