

Arundhati Roy's Search for an Ecological Order: A Study of Her Non-fictional Writings

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Abstract: Arundhati Roy occupies a significant place in the Indian literary imagination as an ardent social and environmental activist, and as a writer who won Booker Prize for her debut novel *The God of Small Things* in 1997. Roy's subsequent literary output consists mainly of politically oriented non-fiction. Her writings in fact draw our attention to and invite comparison with the writings of some of the best writers in English literature who have carved out a niche for themselves as literary activists fighting for a cause. She in fact uses her narrative to create an ecological and cultural space and articulates a "deep map" of India by foregrounding issues of culture, identity and ecology. In this article I discuss Roy's non-fiction writings concerned with environment. She creates a narrative mapping of place by highlighting those issues and geographical features not given so much of prominence by earlier writers.

Key words: significant, ardent, social and environmental activist, ecology, identity, culture

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I believe that a writer is not an escapist, a dreamer of dreams, very much immersed in his or her own world without any concern for the lives of others in the society. A writer often uses his or her art as an instrument of power and liberation to expose the ills of the society and the world outside, and Arundhati Roy is guided by this ardent belief that a writer can be an activist without relinquishing her individuality or forsaking her literary potentials. Her writings in fact draw our attention to and invite comparison with the writings of some of the best writers in English literature who have carved out a niche for themselves as literary activists fighting for a cause. She in a way compels us to consider afresh the role and mission of a writer in a time of crisis.

Her article *The Greater Common Good* (1999) in *Frontline* disparages a project that could force millions to abandon their homes in order to provide limited benefits to a limited number of people. She has demonstrated against construction of the dam both in the Narmada Valley, and globally in an effort to heighten awareness and obtain support for the cause. By drawing upon scholarship from environmental studies and eco-feminism she argues that place is both a geographical location and a cultural construction. Ecofeminism became popular only in the context of numerous protests and activities against environmental destruction, sparked-off initially by recurring ecological disasters. It is a grass root, women-initiated movement around the globe against water pollution, deforestation, toxic waste dumping, agricultural development and sustainability, animal rights and nuclear weapons policies. It is a melting pot of ecology and feminism which is emerged as a reaction to men's treatment against nature as they treat women or vice versa equating women and nature.

Being a feminist of Third World country Arundhati Roy has taken up her pen like other feminist writers against the invisible presence of the hegemonic forces in the form of cultural norms and social taboos related to harassment of women, subaltern and environment. She wrote the second essay *The Greater Common Good* in support for the displaced tribal people who suffer from the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam on the banks of the Narmada valley. She

had taken up a challenge and made it a national issue after having witnessed the suffering of people. She has become part of the suffering humanity with her words and deeds.

As her life was spent on the banks of a river in Kerala; her instinct took her to support the idea of people fighting to save a river and for substance of environment. In order to find out the exact picture of the Narmada valley, she has spent many days with the tribal people, meeting the homeless and the destitute. She decided to do something for the people of the Narmada valley who suffer in the name of development. The earnest quest for an immediate action resulted in the publication of *The Greater Common Good*, in which she wrote:

“Curiosity took me to the Narmada valley. Instinct told me that this was the big one. The one in which the battle lines were clearly drawn, the warring armies massed along them. The one in which it would be... International Aid” (36).

Since gaining independence, India has uprooted and displaced more than 60 million people through its numerous dams, special economic zones, mines, thermal and nuclear power plants, industrial complexes and more. The displaced are mostly the poor: farmers, Adivasi, Dalits, and other marginal groups. In the name of development they are herded out of their rich natural habits and mod to fend for themselves. Roy takes of this issue and writes in *The Greater Common Good*:

“They’re guaranteed way of taking a farmer’s wisdom away from him. They’re a brazen means of taking water, land and irrigation away from the poor and lifting into the rich. Their reservoirs displace huge population of people, leaving them homeless and destitute....They cause floods, water logging, salinity, they spread disease. There is mounting evidence that links Big Dams to earthquakes” (42).

As a woman she grew up in a village in India. She has spent her whole life fighting for tradition. There’s no way that she wants to be a traditional Indian woman. So she is not talking about being against development. She is talking about the politics of development. In *The Greater Common Good*, Roy makes her position clear by stating that she is not against development projects. Roy visited the Narmada valley only for the sake of curiosity. Roy says:

I’m not an anti-development junkie, nor a proselytizer for the eternal upholding of custom and tradition (36).

India is an agrarian country and dams play vital role in irrigating the agricultural field. Jawaharlal Nehru spoke of dams as the “Temples of modern India” which he himself regretted later in his life (40). Roy criticizes dam is equated with being anti-national. The dam building industry grew into such an extent that it was “equated with Nation-building” (41).

The thing about them is that people have to understand that they're just monuments to corruption and they are undemocratic. They centralize natural resources, snatch them away from people, and then redistribute them to a favored few. The importance of dam has made its way into primary school textbooks and the children are taught only the good aspect of big dams.

Today, India doesn't have a national resettlement policy. The government of Madhya Pradesh, where 80 per cent of Sardar Sarover-displaced people are from, gave a written affidavit in court saying it did not have enough land to resettle people. The Supreme Court still ordered the construction of the dam to go ahead. Then the people who are driven out from their villages by these development projects, they all migrate to the cities. And there, again, they are non-citizens, living in slums. Roy criticizes the Government for not having a "National Rehabilitation Policy". In this essay she makes fun of the existing scenario in the following words:

A cash compensation, to be paid by an Indian government official to an illiterate tribal man (the women get nothing) in a land where even the postman demands a tip for a delivery! Most tribal people have no formal title to their land and therefore cannot claim compensation anyway. Most tribal people or let's say most small farmers – have as much use for money as a Supreme Court judge has for a bag of fertilizer (45).

The Narmada Valley Development Project is undoubtedly big and it is a Herculean task for the Government to complete it without dispute. The project is estimated to "affect the lives of twenty five million people who live in the valley" (18). The project can also "alter the ecology of the entire river basin of one of India's biggest rivers" (*ibid*). The natural vegetation that supports the eco-system will be affected. The project is estimated to "submerge and destroy 4,000 square kilo meters of natural deciduous forest" (*ibid*).

The foundation stone for the Sardar Sarovar Dam was laid by Jawaharlal Nehru in 1961. The founding fathers had fixed the height of the dam to a moderate height of 49.8 meters. The then Government of Gujarat acquired 1,600 acres of land through a trick played on its people. In *The Greater Common Good*, Roy brings out the genesis of the Sardar Sarovar Dam. In 1961, the people of Kothie village were told by a government officer that some of their land would be needed for constructing a helipad because an important person was going to visit them. The crops that were about to be harvested were destroyed with immediate effect. The villagers were forced to sign different papers and a sum of money was given in return.

The construction of the dam began in full swing and the poor villagers became victims of the project. The Government took no initiative in rehabilitating the people except the cash compensation being paid in different installments. Roy accuses the Government of Gujarat for having the rehabilitation policy only on paper (71). The Government carries out big projects like the Sardar Sarovar Dam for the greater common good of the people and at the same time neglects the harmful consequences of such projects upon the people and the environment. As the

height of the Sardar Sarovar Dam goes up, the people and the forest become inevitable prey to mega dam:

It thinks nothing of submerging a valley that has yielded fossils, microliths and rock paintings, the only valley in India, according to archaeologists, that contains an uninterrupted record of human occupation from the Old Stone Age (80).

The illiterate villagers thought that the money was given as compensation for their lost crops. The VIP was none other than the Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru who laid the foundation stone for the Sardar Sarovar Dam by pressing “ a button and there was an explosion on the other side of the river” (44). Roy’s question is very simple and straightforward, “Could Nehru have known when he pressed that button that he had unleashed an incubus?” (77).

Through *The Greater Common Good*, Roy has brought out some stupefying facts about the Narmada Valley Project. The book was an open plea to the authorities to react strongly and effectively for the greater common good. She laments the facts that, “Day by day, river by river, forest by forest . . . bomb by bomb – almost without our knowing it - we are being broken” (95). It is high time that the Government did something to protect the people of the Narmada valley from cultural genocide. Roy roused the inspiration for Narmada Bachao Andolan with her non-fictional work *The Greater Common Good*. She encouraged them to strive towards the goal, the goal of being liberated from all kinds of invasion and achieve peace and serenity in the valley.

Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save Narmada Movement - NBA) started its operation in 1985. The initiative for NBA came from the people and the leadership was provided by Medha Patkar and a handful of activists. The spiritual leadership for NBA was given by Babe Amte, a venerable champion of the underdogs in India. NBA has got many supporters at national and international levels but it receives no foreign funds for its activities. It upholds the philosophy of non-violence as propounded by the father of the nation, Mahatma Gandhiji. NBA protests against the Narmada Valley Development Project (NVDP) for its lack of rehabilitation measures. NBA has been reiterating from the very beginning that so many dams centered at one point will be a great threat to the eco-system. Roy became an ardent supporter of Narmada Bachao Andolan with the publication of *The Greater Common Good*. She extends her full support to the people of the Narmada valley especially those who are affected by the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam. Roy joined hands with hundreds of activists of Narmada Bachao Andolan to fight against the social nuisance. Roy’s presence gave a new morale to the activists of NBA to march ahead with confidence and to face the eventualities of the future. NBA activists welcomed *The Greater Common Good* as the dawn of a new struggle in the Narmada valley. In *The Greater Common Good*, Roy speaks about the Narmada Valley Development Project as “India’s Greatest Planned Environmental Disaster” (61).

Roy had enough time at her disposal to visit the displaced tribals of the Narmada valley in their tents. She mingled freely with them and expressed solidarity with the people. Roy wholeheartedly supported Narmada Bachao Andolan with huge amount of money that she got

from the Booker Prize. She gave wide publicity to the issue and the struggles in Narmada valley were being covered by many of the international journals. She supported the displaced tribal people of the Narmada valley as they are “nothing but refugees in an unacknowledged war” (47). The people who lost their land in the name of development should be given enough land for the proper rehabilitation. She was also sentenced to one day imprisonment and to pay a fine of Rs. 2,000/-.

In ‘*Scimitar in the Sun*’ in conversation with N. Ram, Roy tries to clarify regarding the allegation was given by some of the activists from NBA that they have never had the kind of read before when they read, *The God of Small Things*. In this novel she wrote, Estha, one of the characters in her novel, walks ‘along the banks of the river that smelled of shit and pesticides bought with World Bank loans’.

She says that in India, the whole pesticide issue is just unbelievable. The Green Revolution, bringing canal irrigation, bore wells, and chemical pesticides and fertilizer, has now led to serious problems. Growing of cash crop industrial agriculture caused farmers to go into debt to the multinational seed and chemical companies, and when their crops failed, they are committing suicide. They have to invest more and more in pesticides and fertilizers. The ecosystem is ruined day by day. In the Northeast of India, some states exporting frog legs to France. It became a big earner of foreign exchange but frogs began to disappear. The pests used to start destroy crops. The states started having to buy pesticides (with World Bank Loans), which eventually costs more than they export frog legs. The western notion of thinking that one must understand everything can also be destructive what has already told by Vandana Shiva.

Roy through her seminal essays, ‘*The Greater Common Good*’ and ‘*The Road to Harsud*’ hits at the Indian Government and the World Bank for their wayward and insensitive activities in building big dams without thinking of adverse ecological, economical impact on human beings, without caring for how many people get uprooted and dislocated.

The Narmada Sagar is highly destructive to human beings as well as wildlife and ecosystem of the command areas. “The Wild Life Institute of India, Dehradun, warned of the loss of a vast reservoir of bio-diversity, wildlife and rare medicinal plants” (*The Road to Harsud* 245).

The ironically-titled essay *The Greater Common Good*’ which has literary kindled bonfire in which, she writes about the Narmada issue in language so clear that it cuts right through the comfortable clutter of economic rationalization, engineering justifications, legal arguments and political rhetoric we have created to bolster our assumption of what ‘develop’ means.

In *The Briefing* a disembodied voice briefs the presumed audience about an unspecified mission and in the course of it we read of the projected effects of global warming. It was written for and first published in the seventh edition of Manifesta, one of European biennial on contemporary art in 2008. It was a part of the ‘Projected Scenarios’ section, based on and located

in a fort called Fortezza, built in the Alps in 1833. It had never actually been attacked, though built to be impregnable. In Roy's projected scenario for the fort, it is ironically geared to withstand attack of every kind but the one that will eventually destroy it as well as mankind - by the kind of pollution of the natural environment and cultural space that is inescapable today. Roy has avowedly written an allegory. It is centered apparently around the intriguing concept of the possible vulnerability of a fort that has never been attacked. But actually, it points towards the condition of the environment at present and anticipates a worse situation in the future.

It is an allegory, a story about missing Gold and the Snow Wars raging in the Alps. Though this is still a part of Roy's creation, the immediacy of the description makes it palpably familiar, especially as we continue to feel the effects of global warming, pollution of soil, water and air, scarcity of drinking water and legal as well as physical battles over these and other natural resources, in many parts of the world. The voice describes the "texture and fabric" of the place under discussion in this context: "Since the winters have grown warmer here, there are fewer 'snowmaking' days and as a result there's not enough snow to cover the ski-slopes. ... Every one degree Celsius increase in winter temperatures spells doom for almost one hundred ski-resorts. That...is a lot of jobs and money" (205-206). Since Fortezza is located in the Alps, the projected lack of snow there is intended to display one of the most dangerous consequences of global warming. But when the issue of commercialization of every aspect of nature and culture is added to this projected scenario, a murky picture emerges. The greed to control and exploit completely everything in nature might well continue to fuel the competition for such supremacy unto the end. The voice in Roy's work refers to a certain "Guenther Holzhausen, CEO of Mountain White, a new branded snow product... Hot Snow (because it can be manufactured at two or three degrees Celsius above the normal temperature)"(206). This businessman is quoted by the 'Voice':

"The changing climate is a great opportunity for the Alps. The extremely high temperatures and rising sea levels brought about by global warming will be bad for seaside tourism. Ten years from now people usually headed for the Mediterranean will be coming to the comparatively cooler Alps for skiing holidays" (*ibid*).

What is to be noted is that the precarious state of the environment and its extremely serious consequences in terms of submergence of low-lying land and cancerous exposure to the combined effect of pollution and sunlight are elided over rather neatly. And yet Roy's dexterous handling of the rhetoric actually reminds us of her indignation over this silent part or the ruthless commercial exploitation of natural resources resulting in complete destruction of environment and ecology of a place and dispossession and eviction of those who live closest to it. It also reminds us of her need to turn to activism for a number of environmental (as in the case of India's Greatest Planned Environmental Disaster centered around the Narmada valley) in India and abroad.

It has been much discussed about Arundhati Roy's non-fiction writings relating to environmental studies and ecofeminism. This chapter also locates to the cultural construction articulating deep map of India pertaining to identity and ecological crisis so far.

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