

## Portrayal of Environment in the Novels of Arundhati Roy

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### Abstract

Concerns for environment have always occupied the attention of Arundhati Roy. She has been part of many protests and demonstrations against government's unfriendly initiatives moved in the name of the so-called development. She is well-known for her outspoken statements. As a result, she has invited a lot of criticism from the quarters of politics and humanities. In her protests and demonstrations, Arundhati Roy was found right. She opposed the policy and plan that approve constructions of big dams for generating hydroelectric power. She opposed the production of nuclear weapons. She opposed corporatization and globalisation. She did all in view of saving life and nature prevailing nearby the proposed locations. Arundhati Roy was well acquainted with the possible dangers of the environmental degradation. She went to the site to verify and found all rules and principles being ignored and glossed over. Her concerns for ecosystem found due treatment in her both novels, *The God of Small Things* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*.

**Keywords:** Environment; Meenachal; Jhelum; eco-ills; and pollutants.

### Introduction

Arundhati Roy throughout her writings (both fictional and non-fictional) and activism has never forgotten addressing causes and concerns of underprivileged and unheard people of Indian society. To the contrary, she finds the government espousing concerns of interest vested people. The government aims at providing facilities to rich class of people while her concerns were to save environment, tribes and their lands they live and are fed on. The poor people always lived with nature, by nature, and on nature whereas the rich always waged war against the nature and the poor. The policy-makers and government officials listen to the rich but get dumb and blind before the poor.

## Discussion

In ancient India, environment had been adorable but with the influx of colonial ways of life and thinking, it fell prey to human greed and corruption. It became object to be enjoyed and plundered holding no bars. It became one of small things during the liberalisation movement. People forgot the overarching value of nature. Growing hunger for money and pleasure prevented people from realising that one day environment being exploited continuously would bring about havoc upon the humanity in general ignoring any distinction such as, race, region, class and gender.

Environment is one of the small things in the novel *The God of Small Things*. It is denoted by “insects and flowers, wind and water” (Cowley 28). Meenachal river that flows through Ayemenem fell prey to decay and degradation gradually. Estha and Rahel used to dream for their river when they were quite young. During their childhood, the river Meenachal “was warm, the water. Greygreen. Like rippled silk. With fish in it. With the sky and trees in it. and at night, the broken yellow moon in it” (TGST 123). The river front of Meenachal was for them a place to visit for pleasure. But twenty-three years later when Rahel returns to Ayemenem to meet her brother Estha, she found the river shrunk. It welcomes her “with a ghastly skull’s smile, with holes where teeth had been, and a limp hand raised from a hospital bed” (TGST 124). A saltwater barrage was built to satisfy paddy-farmers in exchange of votes. The barrage regulated the inflow of saltwater and thereby paddy-farmers could harvest two paddy-crops in a year in place of one. Thus, they began earning more money by growing paddy-crop “for the price of a river” (TGST 124). Though it was the month of June and rain yet the river looked “no more than a swollen drain now” (TGST 124). It had no more power to strike terror. The novelist writes about the situation categorically:

On the other side of the river, the steep mud banks changed abruptly into low mud walls of shanty hutments. Children hung their bottoms over the edge and defecated directly onto the squelchy, sucking mud of the exposed river bed. The smaller ones left their dribbling mustard streaks to find their own way down. Eventually, by evening, 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. Upstream, clean mothers washed clothes and pots in unadulterated factory effluents... On warm days the smell of shit lifted off the river and hovered over Ayemenem like a hat. (TGST 125)

The river Meeanachal was used by the men of Ayemenem to let pesticides pass bought with World Bank loans. It is no longer fresh. It smells foul terribly. The city effect has cut the village off the freshness. The growing urbanization shrank the water sources and resources; “the small fish appear in the puddles that fill the PWD potholes on the highways” (TGST 1). Hotels were built up in the god’s own country as their brochures mention the locality. The Karri Saipu estate known as ‘History House’ was also renovated and turned into a five-star hotel called ‘Heritage’. Officials of the hotel had built a wall as to screen off the slum. But they could not stop shit smell hovering in the atmosphere. These hotels do all their best to provide visitors with all kinds of pleasure and facility for a few but can do nothing for the hygiene of the locality.

The Ayemenem house that has seen five generations of people is also delapidated. Rahel who had come after twenty-three years gap to see her brother finds the house suffering carelessness and rejection:

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 windowpanes.

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

The floor was sticky. White walls had turned an uneven grey. Brass hinges and doorhandles were dull and greasy to the touch. Infrequently used plug points were clogged with grime. Light-bulbs had a film of oil on them. The only things that shone were giant cockroaches that scurried around like varnished gofers on a film set. (TGST 88)

With the passage of twenty-three years, Pappachi’s sky blue Plymouth was left to itself which was once his proud possession. After his death, Baby Kochamma and Chacko maintained for a few years but after them it was left unattended. Likewise, Paradise Pickles & Preserves was also left to itself. During the rainy season, “A small, anxious bat flitted between the roof beams. The low cement pickle vats silhouetted in the gloom made the factory floor look like an indoor cemetery for tire cylindrical dead” (TGST 192).

Baby Kochamma who was the only caretaker of the Ayemenem house after Chacko set out for Canada also lost interest in taking care of the house. She had learnt the art of grafting but left it later on and turned to television to pass her time.

In the novel *The God of Small Things*, we saw the river Meenachal, Ayemenem and Ayemenem house subjected to the cruelty and callousness of humans living therein. They

were running after the immediate gain that is money without considering terrible consequences thereof.

Tilottama, the central figure in the second part of the narrative of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* takes a bus to visit edges of the city when Naga goes out for his office. She was actually tired of life at Naga's house. She wanted to live her dreams. By the roadside, she happened to see the mountainous piles of city waste in miles, poor children were picking up plastic bags, ravens and kites were making noise. Tilo took another bus to the riverfront. She saw there "a circular raft built with old mineral-water bottles and plastic jerrycans across the thick, slow filthy river. Buffaloes sank blissfully into the black water. On the pavement vendors sold lush melons and sleek green cucumbers grown in pure factory effluent" (TMUH 235).

Musa the batchmate of Tilo once wrote her about the flood in Srinagar. The uncontrolled mining and extraction of sand and sandstones from the basin of rivers in India have destroyed the ecosystem terribly. The river Jhelum as a victim of uncontrolled mining is one among thousands of rivers of the country. Musa tells about the flood that occurred a year ago in Jhelum:

When the Jhelum rose and breached its banks, the city disappeared. Whole housing colonies went underwater. Army camps, torture centres, hospitals, courthouses, police stations- all went down. Houseboats floated over what had once been market-places. Thousands of people huddled precariously on sharply sloping rooftops and in makeshift shelters set up on higher ground, waiting for rescues that never happened. A drowned city was a spectacle. A drowned civil war was a phenomenon. (TMUH 264)

The rescue team was seen too much cruel and indifferent towards the flood victims but news bulletins put up the whole matter otherwise. Kashmiris don't deserve to be rescued for they were ungrateful and surly. The flood took up many weeks' times to be receded. Musa took a month's time to collect his items anyhow survived from the flood. Tilo had no news about Musa during the flood hours:

When flood receded, it left behind an uninhabitable city, encased in mud. Shops full of mud, houses full of mud, banks full of mud, refrigerators, cupboards, and bookshelves full of mud. And an ungrateful, surly people who had survived without being rescued. (TMUH 264-65)

The Indian Army deployed in Jammu and Kashmir is too found engaged in environmental unfriendly activities. The novelist informs us that saw-mills were set up at army camps. Trees were felled and sent to other parts of the country. Consequently, “the whole forest was disappearing” (TMUH 170). They were more interested in staying there for a prolonged period. They want the status quo. They were not interested in establishing peace and order in Jammu and Kashmir. Major Amrik who was famous for his field operations run a business of furniture on the pretext that the salary he receives from the government was insufficient to his extravagant life style. Before Independence colonial masters were doing the same job being rendered by independent Indians after the end of colonialism.

Industries nearby the national capital polluted the air quality tragically. Delhi became famous for its filthy air and atmosphere. Roy reminds us the poor sense of community hygiene through the character of Mrs Mehra. She is an owner of Toyota Corola car. She is rich enough but pity to her civic sense. She used to throw domestic garbage openly on to the street from her first-floor balcony (TMUH 147). In the name of globalization, numberless hotels and offices were being established only to benefit their owners ultimately. Poor people go on pauperizing whereas the rich go on amassing more and more money to satisfy their unsatiable bellies. It is bad way of life and against the principles of harmony.

The Indian Army is portrayed in the novel cruel and heartless not only towards human beings but pets also. Sultan, a pet of Gulrez was shot dead by the Indian Army for no reason. Even one more pet being carried always by Gulrez was flung into the water of Jhelum. Animals, pets and birds are seen happy and independent in the ministry of Anjum at the graveyard. Before her entry into the graveyard, it was littered with syringes, plastics and vials disposed from the government hospital. In the novel, poor and depressed people are seen friendly and sensitive towards animals whereas the rich are cruel towards them.

### **Conclusion**

At the conclusion, we can say that Arundhati Roy fared well in bringing before the public the condition of environment. In the first novel *The God of Small Things*, Meenachal and in the second novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Jhelum were subjected to human cruelty and insensitivity. Their poise was entirely destroyed and disrupted by a few rich people but the consequences were to be suffered by all. In both novels, Arundhati Roy in her both novels imagined environment in crisis. Her descriptions about both rivers are realistic and fear-evoking. Change in the attitude of people is needed urgently to determine life and society sustainable and sound. In the second novel, she attempts to bring animals to the

attention of the people and thereby tried to sensitize people towards them. Her mission and vision seem to be well co-ordinated because of finding an enlightened and awakened society and life.

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