

ARUNDHATI ROY'S *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS* FROM AN ECOCRITICAL VIEWPOINT

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ABSTRACT

Human beings, in their hard chase to improve their standard of living, have brought in irreparable damages to the environment. Creative writers, who were interested in nature, started to write about the impact of human activities on nature and the elements of nature and they wrote in such a way to create awareness about the conservation of the environment or to caution the readers about the impending dangers awaiting them. Ecocritical theory investigates the relationship between human activities and the natural world, particularly in terms of the influence of each upon the other. This paper highlights how Arundhati Roy has expressed her concern for nature which has been exploited by human beings in the name of civilisation, urbanisation and modernisation and how the detrimental effects of humans' exploitation of nature directly affect human life and living space.

KEYWORDS: Ecocriticism, Modernisation, Environmental Movement

INTRODUCTION

The world, on the whole, is in the tight grip of the adverse effects of what humans have been doing for centuries together to develop their standard of living. In their craving to have a comfortable and sophisticated life, they, knowingly and unknowingly, have harmed the environment to a great extent. Every step taken by humans to have development and to accommodate comfort has eventually damaged one or the other component of nature. The present global situation makes people realize the bitter truth that all their activities to foster development in every possible area have started to backfire.

The huge leap in the living condition of humans, right from the Stone Age to the twenty-first century is amazing and jaw-dropping. All innovations and cutting edge technologies reveal the marvels of human brain. Humans have landed on the Moon. They are exploring Mars. Many of the once dreamed or imagined things have become realities. Technological innovations and developments have brought not only a lot of benefits for humans, but also an equal share of problems, especially ecology related ones. Ecological problems bring in their way a lot of other related issues which affect humanity, by and large.

AIM OF THE PAPER

The aim of this paper is to highlight how Arundhati Roy has expressed her concern for nature which has been exploited by human beings in the name of civilisation, urbanisation and modernisation and how the detrimental effects of humans' exploitation of nature directly affect human life and living space. This paper also analyses how the novel selected for study falls within the framework of the literary theory, Ecocriticism.

INTRODUCTION OF THE AUTHOR

Suzanna Arundhati Roy (1961-) was born in Ayemenem, a village in Kerala. Arundhati Roy, a writer, an environmentalist and a social activist, is rightly recognized as a multifaceted personality by her compatriots. When she was two, her parents divorced. Being the child of a single mother, who sought financial and moral support from her brother, Roy had an unhappy childhood. So scarcity and destitution were not new for her. After her schooling at Ooty and Kerala, she studied Architecture at the School of Planning and Architecture, New Delhi. Roy worked as a Research Assistant at the National Institute of Urban Affairs, after getting the degree of architecture. She worked with great perseverance and she was awarded scholarship to go to Florence to study the Restoration of Monuments and Historical Urban Centers. Though trained as an architect, she dreamed of a writing career. She started her career by working for television and movies. Her skill in screenplay writing made her win the national film award for best screenplay in 1988.

The publication of “The God of Small Things”, which is not only her debut novel but also her only novel, catapulted Roy to instant international fame. The work was received with mixed responses. Alex Tickell, in the Introduction to his book titled *Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things* says, “*The God of Small Things* generated controversy and encountered mixed critical opinion almost from the moment of its publication in 1997” (xiii). She was given the Booker Prize for this novel in the year of its publication. After that, she started to focus on social and environmental issues and wrote a collection of essays discussing such issues. Her gesture of donating her Booker Prize money and royalties from her books on Narmada Bachao Andolan project speaks loudly about her great concern for environmental conservation.

ECOCRITICISM

Literature is a written record of the thoughts and feelings of creative minds. Fiction writers reflect society and deal with social issues in their works. Writers have been writing about nature and the elements of nature down through the ages. Nature writing plays a significant role in depicting the beauty of nature, portraying the significance of the elements of nature and narrating how the various elements contribute for the well-being of humans. Frank Stewart, in his book *A Natural History of Nature Writing*, says:

Nature writing, in its most thoughtful, responsible expression, is an exploration of neither these important ideas about nature, including the assumption that nature is separate from us neither biologically nor culturally – an idea reinforced by such academic disciplines as behavioural ecology. Indeed, as these disciplines would strongly aver, nature writing, as part of human culture, is itself one of those natural forms. It is up to our nature writers, with their vivifying gift for narration, to clarify and personalize the moral implications of this notion. (229)

Creative writers have been describing the beauty of nature since 300 BC and the writings of Theocritus bear testimony to this fact.

Human beings, in their hard chase to improve their standard of living, have brought in irreparable damages to the environment. Creative writers, who were interested in nature, started to write about the impact of human activities on nature and the elements of nature and they wrote in such a way to create awareness about the conservation of the environment or to caution the readers about the impending dangers awaiting them. Such collective thoughts of the creative writers gave shape for the environmental movement. The environmental movement saw its dawn in the 1960s with the

publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. Louise Westling, in his Introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment*, writes, "Rachel Carson's 'Silent Spring' dramatised the devastating ecological effects of pesticides" (5). The environmental movement paved the way for ecocriticism, as a movement and as a literary theory. About the emergence of this literary theory, Peter Barry says, "Ecocriticism as a concept first arose in the late 1970s, at meetings of the WLA (the Western Literature Association, a body whose field of interest is the literature of the American West)". The term ecocriticism was possibly first coined by William Ruckert in his article, "Literature and Ecology: an Experiment in Ecocriticism".

This fact is substantiated by Peter Barry thus, "In his introduction to a series of brief position papers (all entitled 'What is ecocriticism?') Michael P. Branch traces the word 'ecocriticism' back to William Rueckert's 1978 essay 'Literature and ecology: an experiment in ecocriticism'" (240). Ecocritical theory investigates the relationship between human activities and the natural world, particularly in terms of the influence of each upon the other. It pleads for a better understanding of nature, and it interprets and represents the natural world. It seeks to protect the ecological rights of nature. "Ecocriticism," to go by the words of Cheryl Glotfelty, who is a pioneer in this theory, "is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment". She goes on to say, "ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies" (xviii). She gives clarity on the fact that ecocriticism as a literary theory is different from other literary theories in the way the word 'world' is used. She says, "Literary theory, in general, examines the relations between [sic] writers, texts, and the world. In most literary theory 'the world' is synonymous with society-the social sphere. Ecocriticism expands the notion of 'the world' to include the entire ecosphere" (xix). She throws light on the broader spectrum which ecocritics have to take into consideration when they speak about man and nature.

About the salient features of ecocriticism, Greg Garrard, in his book, *Ecocriticism* writes, "Ecocriticism is unique amongst contemporary literary and cultural theories because of its close relationship with the science of ecology". According to him, "the widest definition of the subject of ecocriticism is the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human, throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term 'human' itself" (5). Greg Garrard, in his Introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, rightly points out the kind of responsibility vested on ecocritics thus, "Ecocriticism has given literary scholars...a meaningful role to play in addressing the most pressing issue of our time – the degraded environment" (xii). In *Ecocriticism*, he discusses the following as the various aspects related to ecocriticism: pollution, pastoral elements, wilderness, apocalypse, the living condition of animals and the dangers that the Earth faces because of the indifferent attitude of human beings towards nature. Environmental pollution increases with every passing year and causes grave and irreparable damage to the Earth. Shashi Bhushan Agrawal and Madhoolika Agrawal, in their Preface to *Environmental Pollution and Plant Responses* write, "In recent years, there have been changes in our understanding of problems related to environmental pollution with new threats of climate change effects that have triggered a wide range of apprehension among scientists and governments in different parts of the globe" (i). Factors like chemical and radioactive pollution, species extinction, the hole in the ozone layer and global warming drive home the bitter truth that we live in an age of environmental crisis.

Pastoral and wilderness are two of the few important concepts related to ecocriticism. Pastoral, Garrard says, "implies an idealisation of rural life" (*Ecocriticism* 33). Pastoral is a concept, writes Terry Gifford in his essay, "Pastoral, Anti-pastoral, and Post-pastoral" published in the book, *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment*, that "started to cream literary output even when the countryside was not 'environment' and nature was not 'ecology'" (17).

Garrard gives clarity about the concept of wilderness as well. He says, “Wilderness has an almost sacramental value: it holds out the promise of a renewed, authentic relation of humanity and the earth” (*Ecocriticism* 59). Wilderness, pastoral and artificially created parks show the gradation of the natural ambience from nature to culture.

ECOCRITICAL ELEMENTS IN ARUNDHATI ROY’S *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*

Human condition cannot be isolated from the environment as one complements the other. As a socially committed person, Arundhati Roy extends her concern for nature. Hence, environmental issues do not fail to grab her attention. She voices her concern for nature vociferously in her fictional and non-fictional writings and expresses the same in her speeches. In *The God of Small Things*, she has presented environmental problems as some of the small things which have been neglected for a long time in Indian society. She puts forth the idea that, like Indian women who remain silent against patriarchal oppression, environment has been enduring a wanton destruction for ages. With great skill, Roy integrates nature with her subject matter. She vividly presents how nature is being exploited by human beings in order to be modernised. She gives expression to her thought that nature is being made the silent victim of human greed and insensitivity and these, in turn, have reflexive effects on human life. The story, which is a series of flashbacks and flash forwards, functions as a helping tool for the author to tell the readers how certain places were in the past and how they are at present.

She opens the novel with the picturesque description of the month of May in Ayemenem, the place where the incidents in the story happen. The colours and smells of the season are painted in a wordy picture at the outset. She writes, “The river shrinks and black crows gorge on bright mangoes in still, dustgreen trees. Red bananas ripen. Jackfruits burst. Dissolute bluebottles hum vacuously in the fruity air” (1). Roy explains the kind of climatic conditions that prevail in Ayemenem. She narrates how people lead planned lives which go hand-in-hand with the changing seasons.

River Meenachal

River was the source that made early men changes their lifestyle by making them settle in river banks, thereby ending their nomadic life. River is the chief source of water, which is one of the life sustaining elements in this planet. It is closely associated with civilization. History exposes the fact that all civilizations flourished only in riverbeds. Riverbed was the place that made human beings think about agriculture. Meenachal is the river of Ayemenem.

When Rahel and Estha, along with their family members, went to receive Margaret, Chacko’s former wife, and Sophie Mol, his daughter, they stayed at a hotel and that night, they dreamt of “their river”, Meenachal (122). Thereby, the author says how the river was once. 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 rich with fishes. The river was so pristine that the sky and the trees were reflected in it.

But the present condition of the river is presented by the author with great remorse and she writes, “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, sequinned 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”. She adds, “Bright plastic bags blew across its viscous, weedy surface like subtropical flying-flowers” (124). And this is the condition of most of the rivers in the country.

The horrifying effect of pollution is again stressed by the author, when she writes that Estha finds “the banks of the river... smelled of shit, and 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” (13). The pollutants spoil the quality of the water and kill the living organisms in it. In addition to this kind of pollution, people pollute the river and the river banks by open defecation. The river loses its purity not on its own, but because of the careless attitude and activities of the people of the locality, especially those who live very close to the river.

If a river, the life giving source, is polluted, the whole area will be affected. The author, with a sense of shame, writes, “On warm days the smell of shit lifted off the river and hovered over Ayemenem like a hat” (125). Such matters are not exclusive for the river Meenachal and Ayemenem, instead, these are problems prevailing all through the country.

Technological Development and Nature

When technology and its products become the priority of people, they tend to ignore nature. Baby Kochamma, the aunt of Rahel's and Estha's mother, gained “a diploma in Ornamental Gradening”. About her involvement in gardening, the author writes, “To keep her from brooding, her father gave Baby Kochamma charge of the front garden of the Ayemenem House, where she raised a fierce, bitter garden that people came all the way from Kottayam to see” (26). About her garden, the author writes:

It was a circular, sloping patch of ground, with a steep gravel driveway looping around it. Baby Kochamma turned it into a lush maze of dwarf hedges, rocks and gargoyles. The flower she loved the most was the anthurium.... In the centre of Baby Kochamma's garden, surrounded by beds of canna and phlox, a marble cherub peed an endless silver arc into a shallow pool in which a single blue lotus bloomed. At each corner of the pool lolled a pink plaster-of-Paris gnome with rosy cheeks and a peaked red cap. (26)

She took great care of her garden. Later, she lost interest in gardening when she installed a dish antenna on her house roof. The ‘satellite TV’ became her ‘new love’ and she completely ignored her garden. Social status crumbled when she allowed her maid, Kochu Maria, to watch TV along with her.

Population Explosion

Population explosion and better financial conditions are two major factors which lead to the conversion of agricultural and pastoral land into residential and commercial areas. Population explosion is universally a threat to the ecosystem. With more people, more space for accommodation is to be found. The city limits are extended and new suburban areas are formed at the cost of the natural environment. More areas are urbanized. With less number of trees and minimal greenery, air pollution increases drastically. Breathing impure and polluted air leads to a number of health issues. Roy refers to these newly promoted residential areas and urbanisation, when she writes, “the new, freshly baked, iced, Gulf-money houses built by nurses, masons, wire-benders and bank clerks who worked hard and unhappily in faraway

places” (13). On the main road, behind the Ayemenem house, several houses have been constructed. Roy brings out how Ayemenem was and how it is at present through the following lines:

Here too, houses had mushroomed, and it was only the fact that they nestled under trees, and that the narrow paths that branched off the main road and led to them were not motorable, that gave Ayemenem the semblance of rural quietness. In truth, its population had swelled to the size of a little town. (128)

She makes it clear that population explosion is a problem even in a village like hers.

Man versus Nature

Man versus nature is one of the key concepts of the theory of ecocriticism. The various characters of this novel think of or view nature in different ways. Velutha is the god of small things in this novel. Though he is a man of low origin, he exhibits great skills. When he was eleven, he could make “intricate toys-tiny windmills, rattles, minute jewel boxes out of dried palm reeds; he could carve perfect boats out of tapioca stems and figurines on cashew nuts” (74). When he was sixteen, he “was an accomplished carpenter. He had his own set of carpentry tools and a distinctly German design sensibility” (75). His skills gain him entry in the Ayemenem house and the members of the house love him.

Velutha has “a light brown birthmark, shaped like a pointed dry leaf” (73). The author makes Velutha connect his birthmark with nature. He claims, “it was a lucky leaf, that made the monsoons come on time” (73). But the mark does not bring him good luck. In spite of being so skilled and talented, he ends up doing only manual labour.

When he has a difference of opinion with his father, he avoids going home and he leads a life that harmoniously blends with nature. The author describes, “He caught fish in the river and cooked it on an open fire. He slept outdoors, on the banks of the river” (76-77). When he does not have a home to live, he very comfortably becomes part of nature. When he makes himself homeless, Meenachal river bank becomes his home.

Modernisation and Animals

Roy speaks about the adverse effects of modernisation on animals as well. When the family returns to Ayemenem after receiving Margaret Kochamma and Sophie Mol from airport, they see a dead elephant. Roy writes, “Near Ettumanoor they passed a dead temple elephant, electrocuted by a high tension wire that had fallen on the road. An engineer from the Ettumanoor municipality was supervising the disposal of the carcass” (153). Generally, high tension wires are laid a little away from residential areas. When such a thing is done, care for human beings is taken, but safety of animals is out of question. And this elephant had become a victim for it. This reflects how animal safety is an ignored area. She brings out the irony of the situation. High tension wires which are laid for the sake of having certain facilities for human beings have harmful effects on animal and at times, the lives of animals are at stake. But Chacko stops the car to enquire whether the dead elephant is Kochu Thomban, which is the, “Ayemenem temple elephant” (154). When they learn that the dead elephant is not the elephant that they know, in a way, they are relieved of the tension. When the “engineers of the concerned municipality” cremated the electrocuted elephant, they carefully “sawed off the tusks and shared them unofficially” (219-220). Roy presents the sympathetic and empathetic stand of the modern people as far as animals are concerned.

CONCLUSIONS

Arundhati Roy, being a socially aware intellect with deep concern for the environment, expresses her thoughts that human beings need to express a concern for the environment in order to make this earth liveable for generations to come. About Arundhati Roy's intention of bringing in so much of ecocritical elements in her writings, Debarati Bandyopadhyay, in her book titled *Arundhati Roy: Environment and Literary Activism*, comments, "Roy writes to instill knowledge and fear in her audience; she tries to warn so that it creates a possibility of collective awareness and action which might yet help in survival and sustenance of life, both at the global and local level" (4).

Arundhati Roy presents every minute information about Ayemenem from the viewpoint of a person who laments the human exploitation of nature and its elements. The parts of Ayemenem that are being damaged by human intervention and mishandling are carefully interwoven with the story. Roy tries to make the readers realize the impact of the damage caused to the environment.

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