



## **Ecological Concerns in Arundhati Roy's Selected Essays**

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### Abstract

The kinship between nature and literature is age-old. Almost every literary genre such as poetry, drama, fiction and non-fiction has been dealing with themes about nature or environment. However, the twentieth century has witnessed a great number of incidents of degradation of natural environment in the wake of industrial and technological development all around the world. Literature has constantly been recording the ecological disasters caused by human beings. Various fictional and nonfictional writings have criticized human activities responsible for the destruction of nature and supporting ecosystems. Many contemporary writers have written dedicatedly about emerging ecological concerns in their works. Among them, Arundhati Roy is completely devoted to throw light on various ecological issues through her essays. In the history of Indian English Prose tradition, she has achieved an enviable position as an essayist with her political and environment essays. In view of this, the present research paper aims to trace the ecological concerns in Arundhati Roy's selected essays. Her essays are a powerful voice of human rights and environmental issues. For the purpose of study in the present research paper, Roy's four essays titled "The End of Imagination" (1998), "The Greater Common Good" (1999), "The Road to Harsud" (2004), and "Listening to the Grasshoppers: Genocide, Denial and Celebration" (2009) have been selected. This research paper mainly focuses on the destructive aftermaths of numerous development projects on environment as well as on those who live in close association with the environment such as tribal communities. It offers a trenchant critique of imperial forces of neo-colonialism which subjugate country's natural resources; depletion of environment caused by various dam and mining projects; and ostracism of a large number of indigenous people from the places of their natural habitat.

**Keywords: Ecocriticism, ecology, ecosystem, neo-colonialism, privatization**





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### **Introduction**

As far as the relationship between literature and ecology is concerned, it dates back to the account of Garden of Eden in Hebrew Bible. In third century, BC, 'pastoral' form of literature was introduced by a Greek poet Theocritus. Later on, it was borrowed by Roman poet Virgil to write his work titled *Eclogues* in Latin. Both Theocritus and Virgil depicted an idealised form of rural life where man and nature lives in peace and harmony together. The Elizabethan literary giants such as Edmund Spenser, Sir Philip Sidney, Christopher Marlowe, William Shakespeare and Thomas Lodge had popularized the genre of 'pastoral romance' through their works. The earliest ecological concerns were traced in the writings of Romantics in late eighteenth century. They draw attention towards two contrastive forms of rural and urban life through their nature writings. Their writings revolve around the themes of affectionate observations of the pagan spirit in nature, nostalgia to return to rural life, abandonment of natural beauty by city dwellers, emerging threats to the natural environment due to growing urbanisation and industrialisation, to name a few. The American Transcendentalists relied deeply on the self-reliant spirit of nature to achieve their goals of spiritual fulfilment and escaping the suffering of everyday modern life.

Clearly, nature has been an integral part of literature since ages. Almost all literary genres such as poetry, fiction and nonfiction have exhibited a varied range of natural phenomena. However, the twentieth century has witnessed a great number of incidents of degradation of natural environment in the wake of industrial and technological development all around the world. Literature has constantly been recording the ecological disasters caused by human beings. Various fictional and nonfictional writings have criticised human activities responsible for the



destruction of nature and supporting ecosystems. Many contemporary writers have written dedicatedly about emerging ecological concerns in their works.

Following the same tradition, Arundhati Roy, an Indian author and environmental activist, ponders over the environmental crisis in both her fictional and nonfictional works. Her essays are a powerful voice of human rights and environmental causes. The present research paper aims to retrace multifarious ecological concerns in the context of selected essays by Arundhati Roy. Roy's essays trace down the ecological destruction caused by various development projects. They go back to the root cause of the destruction which lies in the destructive policies of neo-liberal and neo-colonial global powers. It mainly focuses on the destructive aftermaths of numerous development projects on environment as well as on those who live in close association with the environment such as tribal communities. It offers a trenchant critique of imperial forces of neo-colonialism which subjugate country's natural resources; depletion of environment caused by various dam and mining projects; and ostracism of a large number of indigenous people from the places of their natural habitat. Roy's four essays titled "The End of Imagination" (1998), "The Greater Common Good" (1999), "The Road to Harsud" (2004), and "Listening to the Grasshoppers: Genocide, Denial and Celebration" (2009) have been selected for the purpose of study in this research paper.

Indian Literature has a long tradition of nature writings ranging from *Panchtantra* to *The Jungle Book*. Indian writers have been portraying a close association between nature and human lives and their cohabitation since ages. They vividly describe the beauty of nature as well as convey a message of its conservation and perseverance to human race. In the second half of the twentieth century, there are many environmentalists like Amitav Ghosh, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy and Vandana Shiva who have adopted different literary genres for dealing with various ecological concerns through their writings. Among them, Roy is completely devoted to the genre of essay to throw light on various ecological concerns. In the history of Indian English Prose tradition, she has achieved an enviable position as an essayist with her political and environment essays.

Roy has hitherto published two critically acclaimed novels – *The God of Small Things* (1997) which received Man Booker Prize and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017). Her novels touch on the matters of complex caste and class relations, memory and trauma, patriarchal repression, ecological concerns and identity politics. Along with her two works of fiction, Roy has written numerous essays on contemporary culture and politics. *My Seditious Heart: Collected Non-Fiction* (2019) and *Azadi: Freedom, Fascism, Fiction* (2020) are her most recently published essay collection. In *My Seditious Heart: Collected Non-Fiction* (2019), Roy compiles the essays



written over the period of past two decades from the publication of her first essay *The End of Imagination* in 1998, to *The Doctor and the Saint* in 2017 with which the collection ends. In the Foreword to the book, she gives a glimpse of the main thematic concerns of her essays,

The people of Kothie joined the hundreds of thousands of others whose lands and homes would be submerged – farmers, farmworkers, and fisherfolk in the plains, ancient indigenous tribes people in the hills – to fight against what they saw as wanton destruction. Destruction, not just of themselves and their communities, but of soil, water, forests, fish, and wildlife – a whole ecosystem, an entire riparian civilization. (Roy xiii)

From last two decades, Roy has been writing essays for the cause of environment and downtrodden people who are marginalised on the basis of caste, gender, religion, ethnicity and economic inequalities in India including *dalits* and *adivasis*. Like her fiction, her nonfiction also revolves around the themes of social and political discriminations.

### **Ecology and Ecocriticism**

Raymond Williams defines the term ‘ecology’ as a study which “developed the sense of habitat and became the study of the relations of plants and animals with each other and with their habitat” (Williams 111). Nonetheless, he further widens the scope of ecology for denoting to various social concerns where nature interacts with humans and vice versa. This term has been popularised by environmentalists to express their concern for increased environmental degradation in 1950s. The ecological concerns include climate change, pollution, resource depletion, engendered species, global warming and other environmental crisis till then. During the past few decades, anthropocentric ecological crisis has posed a great threat to the environment as well as to human societies. The excessive use of natural resources has left us on the brink of disaster. The ecological concerns have been emerging as a major global issue to be looked into.

In the late 1970s, the term ‘ecocriticism’ was coined to designate “the critical writings that explore the relations between literature and the biological and physical environment, conducted with an acute awareness of the damage being wrought on that environment by human activities” (Abrams 98). Lawrence Buell, a pioneer of ecocriticism, writes in his work titled *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (1995) about a need to find fresh ways to understand a unique association between nature and humanity. The nature tradition in American literature grabs Buell’s attention, particularly environmental nonfiction, from colonial time to the present. Moreover, his book *The Future of*



*Environmental Criticism* (2005), he gives a manifesto of ecocriticism. He provides a critical summary of ecocritical movement. While looking to the future of ecocriticism, he proposes that the discourse of environment studies should become a permanent part of literary and cultural studies.

Postcolonial studies and feminist criticism further expand the area of ecocriticism as eco-feminism, eco-fascism and postcolonial ecocriticism. Nowadays, it is a multidisciplinary arena to study nature and human interaction from varied points of views. The Present research project takes insights from a theoretical perspective developed by Naomi Klein, a Canadian author for the critical interpretation of Roy's essays. In her work titled *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs the Climate* (2014), Klein states that the root cause of growing environment degradation is lying in the neo-liberal and capitalist powers.

She puts forward a complex relationship between environment crisis and modern capitalism where global leaders and elites keep on exploiting natural resources to meet their selfish ends. She argues that how the monopoly of neo-liberal and capitalist market fundamentalism is blocking any serious reform towards rising ecological concerns in our times. Klein also explains how hugely reducing the greenhouse emissions can be human's best chance to concurrently decrease the gaping inequalities, re-imagine broken democracies and rebuild ruined local economies. Her critical insights are helpful to analyse Roy's essays.

### **“The End of Imagination” – An Apocalypse at Doorsteps**

The essay, “The End of Imagination”, was originally published in December 1998. Later on, it appeared in Roy's 2016 essay collection of the same title. In 2019, it again published in *My Seditious Heart: Collected Non-Fiction*. It was written as a response to a series of nuclear tests conducted by the Indian government in a small village named Pokhran of Rajasthan in May 1998. Although the nuclear tests were celebrated as a big national achievement by supporters and right-wing political parties, Roy laments it as a great threat to humans as well as environment. Moreover, the very existence of nuclear bombs in every third country is dangerous and life threatening in itself. Nothing will survive in case there is a nuclear war. It will be a war against whole earth. Roy states,

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. When everything there is to burn has burned and the fires die, smoke will rise and shut out the sun.





The earth will be enveloped in darkness. There will be no day. Only interminable night. Temperatures will drop to far below freezing and nuclear winter will set in. Water will turn into toxic ice. Radioactive fallout will sleep through the earth and contaminate groundwater. Most living things, animal and vegetables, fish and fowl, will die. Only rats and cockroaches will breed and multiply and compete with foraging, relict humans for what little food there is. (Roy 3)

These lines set a post-apocalyptic scene. Sarcastically, nuclear technology is always equated with development and 'future'. However, the above quote shows nothing but destruction and 'end of future' in itself. Nothing will be able to survive in case there is a nuclear war. Nuclear bombs are an outcome of the politics of hate. Roy uses a symbol of rats and cockroaches to depict an anti-life and anti-growth characteristic of post-apocalyptic world. She employs some literary devices and techniques in the essay which give the reader far more serious thought over the issue. She poses a number of important rhetorical questions:

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? (Roy 3)

She uses the literary technique of direct address to the audience. The essay is mostly written using first person singular 'I' and first-person plural 'we'. It shows that the writer addresses directly to the habitants of earth. It is a direct call for quick action against the destruction of natural environment. The essay ends on an advisory note to the citizens of the world that they should timely stand against the proliferation of the bombs which are "anti-democratic, anti-national, anti-human, outright evil thing that man has ever made" (Roy23). It can destroy millions of years old earth and its atmosphere with the blink of an eye.

In the essay, she brings the hypocrisy of mainstream media to the light. The headlines of national of many newspaper and television channels calls these tests a moment of national pride, explosion of self-esteem, path to resurgence, nuclear bombs are for peace not for war and "These are not just nuclear tests, they are nationalism tests" (Roy 10). George Orwell, in his most famous essay "Politics and the English Language" (1946), criticises the impure and political use of English language. He examines various rationales behind the degeneration of modern English. While describing the nature of political language, Orwell says,



Political language – and with variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists – is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.

He raises objections against the gap between the intended and declared intentions of the advocates of modern form of “political quietism” (Orwell). Roy’s essays provide with an Orwellian account of pacification through language. The above mentioned media narratives prove the same. By equating nuclear technology with the overall development of a nation, its dire consequences are being concealed.

### **Destruction of Natural as well as Social Ecosystems for “The Greater Common Good”**

“The Greater Common Good” was first published in January 1999. It also published in *The End of Imagination* in 2016. More recently, it appeared in Roy’s 2019 essay collection *My Seditious Heart: Collected Non-Fiction*. Roy brings forth the historic struggle of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) by native tribes in late 1980s. The essay offers a trenchant critique of unsustainable growth and development. Narmada Valley Project is delineated from the outset in this essay. The project includes building approximately thirty-two hundred dams on river Narmada and its forty-one tributaries. Narmada river, which

. . . winds its way through 1300 kilometres of beautiful, broad-leaved forest and perhaps the most fertile agricultural land in India. Twenty-five million people live in the river valley, linked to the ecosystem and to each other by an ancient intricate web of interdependence. (Roy 37)

The natural habitat of millions of poor people and ecosystem of three states including Maharashtra, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh got affected by the project. Roy is more critical for the destruction of ‘social ecosystems’. *Adivasis* and hundreds of indigenous people, who have been living in a kind of perfect harmony with natural environment, are displaced by the dam projects. She says, “Social links have been smashed, communities broken up” (Roy 54). Roy laments over how the dismantling of human and nature bond and interdependence clearly exhibited in a varied forms of cultural practices of tribal communities. They have lost control over their land which, in return, altered their customs and lifestyles. *Adivasis* are being unhoused from their places of worship because these forests are homes of their gods and demons.



Dam building has engendered a large number of the world's freshwater fish species. The rearing of a fish called hilsa depends upon the other big fishes, which are going to be eliminated by the dams. Furthermore, the construction of big dams can lead to various natural disasters, such as, "Ecologically, too, they're in the doghouse. They lay the earth to waste. They cause floods, water logging, salinity; they spread disease. There is mounting evidence that links Big Dams to earthquake" (Roy 30). The dams have created more flood-prone and draught-prone areas in the valley. Dams often result in massive floods causing the destruction of forests, wildlife habitat and loss of biodiversity breaking various ecosystems.

The essay can be categorised as postcolonial ecocritical studies, because it is mainly focussed on the exploitation of natural resources such as rivers, forests and wildlife for the sake of development. Employing the literary technique of rhetorical questions, Roy asks, "Who owns this land? Who owns its rivers? Its forests? Its fish?" (Roy 27). These are very significant questions demanding answers from the point of view of neo-colonialism. All the questions raise the question of 'ownership', which can be rethought from the perspective of neo-liberalism. The hidden agenda of all development projects is snatching away the resources from Poor and gifting them to the rich corporate houses.

Roy observes that the rise of the dam building industry in India exposes the undemocratic face of the governmental policies. A large number of indigenous people are displaced by the dams. The government, on its part, has no plan for their rehabilitation and resettlement. Ironically, the destitution of millions of people as well as the environmental devastation were justified with statements such as, ". . . it's being done for the sake of the Greater Common Good. That it's being done in the name of Progress, in the name of the national interest" (Roy 34). In this essay, again, Roy disapproves the political use of language. It gives an Orwellian account of political language. The title of the essay is ironic in itself. A large number of people have been denied access to their own lands and resources in the name of general common national cause – that is, 'The Greater Common Good'. A larger ecosystem of Narmada Valley is being destroyed under the cover of common good.

According to Roy, their entire suffering is being overshadowed with big ambiguous terms, such as, 'development', 'rationalism', 'engineering ambitions' and 'modernism'.







On the one hand, it is seen as a war between modern, rational, progressive forces of ‘Development’ versus a sort of neo-Luddite impulse – an irrational, emotional ‘anti-development’ resistance fuelled by an arcadian, pre-industrial dream. (Roy 27)

The above-mentioned quote elucidates that how the lives of millions of *adivasis* are neglected by the policy makers in India. They are represented as ‘irrational’, ‘pre-industrial’ and ‘anti-developmental’. The Narmada Bachao Andolan, the only collective voice of resistance against unsustainable development in the Narmada valley, has been looked down in India. This revolution is called by the name of “misinformed emotionalism” (Roy 26). The international institutions like World Bank, working under the banner of ‘developmental aid’ in third world countries, have also been criticised as victimisers of the poor in this essay. However, Roy counts such aid just another business opportunity for the first world to subjugate the third world like colonialism. Roy points out,

. . . the dam-building industry in the first world is in trouble and out of work. So, it’s exported to the third world in the name of Development Aid, along with their other waste, like old weapons, supernatural aircraft carriers, and banned pesticides. (Roy 31)

After colonialism is long over, the third world countries and its poor citizens and also the environment is still being exploited by the new regime of neo-colonialism. Narmada Valley Development projects, being boasted as the most ambitious river valley projects in human history ever, have uprooted millions of *adivasis* and *dalits*. The victimhood of the displaced and oppressed people is kept hidden under fancy terms such as Project-Affected Persons (PAPs). In real sense of the word, they are ‘internally displaced people’. Roy rightly points out, “these acronyms, they manage to mutate muscle and blood into cold statistics” (Roy 42). The essays criticise this hideous use of language.

### “The Road to Harsud”: An Environmentalist’s Journey towards Despair

“The Road to Harsud” was originally written in 2004 after Roy’s visit to a seven-hundred years old town named Harsud in Madhya Pradesh. It was republished in *My Seditious Heart: Collected Non-Fiction* in 2019. Roy criticises the “social and ecological devastation” spread by the construction of Narmada Sagar Dam (Roy 311). The essay narrates the sad events of destruction and demolition, both of environment and the livelihood of poor marginalised people.



Harsud is a seven-hundred-year-old town in Madhya Pradesh, slated to be submerged by the reservoir of the Narmada Sagar Dam. . . . The 262-metre-high Narmada Sagar will be the highest of the high dams on the Narmada, its reservoir the largest in India. In order to irrigate 123,000 hectares of land, it will submerge 91,000 hectares. This includes 41,000 hectares of prime dry deciduous forest, 249 villages, and town of Harsud.

From the above given data, it becomes clear that a great number of ecosystems have been broken up by dams in the Narmada valley. The Narmada Sagar Dam, also known as Indira Dam, is one of the most destructive dams to be constructed on Narmada and its tributaries. Many Indian environmentalists like Ashish Kothari, Claude Alvarez and Ramesh Billorey give warnings against the construction of big dams. They said that among all the high dams on Narmada “the Narmada Sagar would be the most destructive” (310). The Wildlife Institute of Dehradun also “warned of the loss of bio-diversity, wildlife, and rare medicinal plants” (Roy 310). In its review report of 1993, the Ministry of Environment and Forests estimated that the forests worth the value of 33,923 crores will be submerged in the water logging and the floods which follow after the construction of the dam. Ignoring all the warnings, the governmental policies give support to the dam-building industries. The politicians and global elites keep on counting the socio-economic benefits of the dams and ignore the destructive aspects completely.

The town of Harsud is a microcosm of the even greater destruction caused by various development projects. The road which leads to the town shows a clear image of hypocrisy of governmental policies, privatisation and globalisation. The road to Harsud is a shiny newly build private highway. It is a toll road with big cars and trucks running up and down. However, on the side of the road there is a tin roofed shabby settlement with a sign “*Baad Rahat Kendra*”. It is a Flood Relief Centre which stands in contrast with the developed and beautiful highway. Roy shows the hidden side of the growth and development with vivid description of destruction. She unveils the neo-colonial powers continuously at work,

What makes the World Bank so very solicitous? Power and Water ‘Reforms’ in developing countries are the twenty-first century’s version of the Great Game. All the usual suspects, beginning of course with the World Bank, the big private banks, and multinational corporations, are cruising around, looking for sweetheart deals. (Roy 327)



The above lines show that how even after the end of colonialism, it still exists in the newest forms and shapes. Kwame Nkrumah, a Ghanaian revolutionary and political theorist, defines the regime of neo-colonialism in his famous work *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*. The essence of neo-colonialism is that a state which is its subject seems independent outwardly, however, its economic system and political policy are all guided from outside. In place of colonialism as the main instrument of imperialism, what we have today is – neo-colonialism. The involvement of the global powers like World Bank in various development projects exhibits the modern form of imperialism in India.

Hundreds of villages turn into ghost sights. Thousands of families, most of them are *dalits* and *adivasis*, are displaced. Roy states ironically, “People with nowhere to go are leaving” (Roy 313). Their livestock such as buffaloes and cows are drowning in front of their eyes. They are completely helpless. In 1989, they began protesting against the prevalent demolition. However, their voices of dissent were ignored and suppressed. They are forced to become wage labourers and living in shabby slums at the outskirts of big cities.

### **Analogy of Genocide and Ecocide in “Listening to Grasshoppers”**

The essay “Listening to the Grasshoppers: Genocide, Denial and Celebration” was published in *Listening to Grasshoppers: Field Notes on Democracy and My Seditious Heart: Collected Non-Fiction*, in 2009 and 2019 respectively. This was a lecture delivered by Roy on 18 January 2008 to commemorate the first anniversary of the assassination of Hrant Dink, a Turkish Armenian editor and intellectual. She narrates the sad incident of Gujarat riots of 2002. She comes up with the word – genocide to critically define the riots. Roy describes genocide as an old inhuman practice of exterminating ethnic, religious or racial communities. The metaphor of grasshopper signifies the upcoming dangers. However, there are very few people like Hrant Dink who are capable of listening to the coming grasshoppers’ voices “the wheat is ripening and the grasshoppers have landed” and warn against future perils (Roy 412).

In twenty-first century, the psychology of genocide becomes even more powerful. Now, it has been supported by various forces of privatisation, capitalism and neo-liberalism. Roy states, “Of course, today, when genocide politics meets the free market, official recognition – or denial – of holocaust and genocides is a multinational business enterprise” (Roy 414). It has become more difficult to fight with the evils of genocide in modern times. Genocide denial is far more easy now than it was in past centuries. The access to the denial politics has increased with the advent of a varied number of ‘isms’. For instant, neo-colonialism is a more complex and dangerous form of



exploitation. The means of oppression are hideous in comparison to the colonialism and imperialism of the past centuries. The developing countries are being kept under the thumb of powerful elites of the developed world in the wake of globalisation, developmental aids, philanthropy, monetary funding etc.

In the same way, neo-liberal forces are continuously exploiting the poor marginalised groups and the environment. Roy describes, “The new regime of privatization and liberalization resulted in the sale of the country’s natural resources and public infrastructure to private corporations” (Roy 425). She critically brings the destructive aftermaths of such developmental projects to light. Her essays offer a harsh critique of neo-liberalism, neo-colonialism, globalisation and privatisation. A great number of dam building industries have destroyed ecology of the Narmada Valley. She uses the term ‘ecocide’ for environmental destruction which is caused by human interaction. Like genocide eliminates groups of people on the basis of caste, race and ethnic discrimination. Ecocide stands for persistent damage to the ecosystems, species and humans or communities who live in close contact with nature and supplement its growth. The more common examples are indigenous people like *adivasis*. The people of Tadvi, Dongria Kond, Ho, Oraon, Kol, Santhal, Munda, Kevat and Kahar tribal communities have been displaced by various development projects in India. All of them are very ancient tribes of small farmers, fishermen and ferrymen living in peace and harmony with the environment. They are an integral part of the whole ecology of forests and rivers in Narmada Valley.

## **Conclusion**

As we know, India is a home to millions of wildlife animals and plants. It has a rich variety of ecosystems. Moreover, many indigenous tribes have been living in peace with natural environment since ages. Both environment and *adivasis* supplement to the growth and well-being of one another. To sum up, the present paper mainly focuses on how a great number of ecosystems as well as tribal communities have been displaced by various development projects since Independence in India. The unsustainable growth and development leads to the ostracism of millions of poor marginalised people and leaving a number of wildlife species on the verge of extinction and elopement. It is primarily focussed on the environmental destruction done by Narmada Valley Development Projects. The selected essays provide the first-hand experiences of the writer in the valley. Roy has participated in various protests widely known as Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA). The selected essays present a pathetic image of ecological destruction and demolition by various dams, mining and other irrigation projects from past few decades. In her essays, Roy makes the reader understand the whole political scenario which is at work behind the



whole discourse of national development. She puts forward the role of numerous neo-liberal forces to create destruction on the name of development in third world countries. They have been continuously exploiting country's natural resources.

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