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Environmental Concerns in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*: A Critical Study

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Abstract:

Arundhati Roy (1961-) is an internationally acclaimed Indian female writer. She catapulted to fame after winning the Man Booker Prize in 1997 for her stunning debut novel *The God of Small Things* (1997). Her recent novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) is a fictional masterpiece with an epic-like scope.

This paper aims to study the environmental issues raised by Roy in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Issues ranging from Indian vulture 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, unrestricted consumer indulgence, enslavement of Adivasi (tribal) girls and genetic modification 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, Deforestation, Poverty, Urbanization, Consumerism, Sustainable

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

—Margaret Mead

Arundhati Roy's stature as an Indian female writer is both reformatory as well as rebellious. Her fiction is not grandiose, but rather intricately designed and richly layered with a generous amount of thematic concerns, symbolisms, well-crafted characters and meticulously architected plot. Her current novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), with its epic-like stature traverses beyond the dictates of conventional storytelling. This novel is neither a political treatise nor a journalistic report that condenses the facts about life in India. On the contrary this novel explores the societal dimensions and the political sphere with curiosity so as to provide the

readers with wholesome realities. The narrative of Roy is deeply informed, seamlessly woven, pragmatic and judicious.

Roy is a zealous and internationally recognized environmental activist. She won accolades for her debut novel *The God of Small Things* that was published in the year 1997. As an impassioned writer of non-fiction Roy is engaged in various socio-political issues of consequence. Her literary activism is factual, naturalistic, provocative and unbiased. She has penned her concern regarding innumerable issues that called for public attention. Some such issues include the rising tide of globalization, the hazards of consumerism and urbanization, the deteriorating condition of the environment, the growing power of communalism, Kashmir insurgency, the Maoist struggle and the rapidly evolving face of Indian democracy. Her notable non-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 for 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. In this regard Alex Clark in his review of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* affirms that:

It has become something of a cliché to talk about contemporary Indian novels written in English as refracting the Victorian panorama of Dickens, or of co-opting the tropes of magical realism to invoke the continuing pull of traditional beliefs in a country that defined itself on the basis of its secularism. But in truth, these literary influences are more subverted than they are copied; claimed, in the service of encompassing a society too vast and diverse ever to be viewed through a single lens. (n.pag.)

The corpus of Indian writing in English is an outcome of a counter-culture that came into being as a post-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, Aravind Adiga, Suketu Mehta, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Amitav Ghosh do not hesitate in experimenting with literary strategies and in promoting the interplay of genres.

Literary works of Roy have unfailingly contributed to the cult of environmental writing. The global environmental challenges have perennially drawn her attention and provided her writings with an uncompromising spirit. The epigraph attached to *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* reads, "To, The Unconsoled" (n.pag.). The mood of the writer resonates in the epigraph where she acknowledges the presence of those who are unconsoled. Though the readers are not aware of the identity of these unconsoled people, yet their presence is undeniably a dominant one. As the narrative progresses the prologue to the novel provides a glimpse of the

author's inclinations and concerns. The graphic detailing of the prologue is seriously poetic and profoundly thoughtful. The prologue reads:

At magic hour, when the sun has gone but the light has not, armies of flying foxes unhinge themselves from the Banyan trees in the old graveyard and drift across the city like smoke. When the bats leave, the crows come home. Not all the din of their homecoming fills the silence left by the sparrows that have gone missing, and the old white-backed vultures, custodians of the dead for more than a hundred million years, that have been wiped out. The vultures died of diclofenac poisoning. Diclofenac, cow-aspirin, given to cattle as a muscle relaxant, to ease pain and increase the production of milk, works – worked – like nerve gas on white-backed vultures. Each chemically relaxed, milk-producing cow or buffalo that died became poisoned vulture-bait. As cattle turned into better dairy machines, as the city ate more ice cream, butterscotch-crunch, nutty-buddy and chocolate-chip, as it drank more mango milkshake, vultures' necks began to droop as though they were tired and simply couldn't stay awake. Silver beards of saliva dripped from their beaks, and one by one they tumbled off their branches, dead.

Not many noticed the passing of the friendly old birds. There was so much else to look forward to. (n.pag.)

“At magic hour”, tells Roy, as though beginning a fairytale. 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 fairytale opening. There is a binary opposition between the magical charm of the opening line and stark realities that follow. It must therefore be noted that this novel has no element of magic realism. In Waterstones interview held on 5 June 2017, 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 humans 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 (*Gyps Bengalensis*). 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 Lindsay Oaks 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 Roy.

The focus of the author then traverses 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 peerless literary ingenuity. She observes that:

Around her the city sprawled for miles. Thousand-year-old sorceress, dozing, but not asleep, even at this hour. Grey flyovers snaked out of her Medusa skull, tangling and untangling under the yellow sodium haze. Sleeping bodies of homeless people lined their high, narrow pavements, head to toe, head to toe, head to toe, looping into the distance." (*TMUH* 96)

The city of Delhi with its historic past is personified as an old woman with "parchment skin", "wrinkle", "arthritic joint", "varicose veins", "withered tits", "aching feet", and "stiff old hips" (96). The timeline in the novel extends from post-independent India till the present decade. The capitalists and the ruling political leaders want to turn the old city into the, ". . . supercapital of the world's favourite new superpower" (96). The urge to modernize India has set in, and Delhi, as the novel portrays, is being forced to undergo transformation that goes well with the mercenary motives of those ruling it. The economic boom has catapulted the market economy with new and alluring retail strategies. The supermarket culture has been introduced in India with great enthusiasm. Thus, 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 the construction of massive dams across India. As Roy observes, "Skyscrapers and steel factories sprang up where forests used to be, rivers were bottled and sold in supermarkets, fish were tinned, mountains mined and turned into shining missiles. Massive dams lit up the cities like Christmas trees. Everyone was happy" (98). The business magnates and ruling politicians did not recognize the corroding impact that deforestation, processed food and mineral water had on the Indian environment and health.

The rivers shrank, the trees fell and the environment around us was harmed with ease. Another noticeable happening was the banning of surplus people. "Away from the lights and advertisements, villages were being emptied. Cities too. Millions of people were being moved, but nobody knew where to" (98) asserts the narrator. The poor were being removed from cities that were to be occupied by the affluent population alone. The underprivileged population had to evict the cities without any reason. Survival of many was in peril under such horrendous regulations. However, the inconsiderate people who occupied the higher echelons of the societal structure carried on with their pseudo blissful lives. As the narrator remarks:

But the food shops were bursting with food. The bookshops were bursting with books. The shoe shops were bursting with shoes. And people (who counted as people) said to one another, 'You don't have to go abroad for shopping any more. Imported things are available here now. (99)

The city crumbled under the pressure of ultra modernization that was foolishly imposed upon it. Traffic multiplied posing serious issues and the poor or the “. . . newly dispossessed, who lived in the cracks and fissures of the city, emerged and swarmed around the sleek, climate-controlled cars, selling cloth dusters, mobile phone charges, model jumbo jets, business magazines, pirated management books . . .”(100). The poor that 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). They were dumped in that wasteland on account of their economic status. The societal framework headed towards the creation of an unstable structure with two classes; the haves and the have-nots. The middle class began to wither gradually.

As the Indian markets evolved the trend of urbanization began to surface. Major increase in urban population was observed. The cities spread territorially turning farmlands and rural areas into hubs of cemented cubicles called houses. Real estate flourished under the project of urbanization as apartment culture and other luxury housing schemes were introduced. Urbanization gave deep roots to marginalization of the less privileged people and rise of ghettos. In a 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 ghettoisation remains appallingly commonplace in Indian cities. . . ” (n.pag.). Rapid growth in urban population has led to a major rift in society by increasing the number of deprived people. This scenario may end up in destructive class wars. The construction sites are the nucleus of servitude where the daily wagers are exploited, “. . .heaving stones for a pharaoh’s pyramid” (145). As described by Biplab Dasgupta, a character in this novel, the surroundings have changed from ‘quiet’ and ‘pretty’ to noisy and overcrowded. He contends that:

Most of the older houses have been torn down and plush new developers’ flats are coming up in their place. Some are on stilts, the ground floors given over to parking. It’s a good idea in this car-maddened city, but some-how it saddens me. I’m not sure why. Nostalgia for an older, quieter time perhaps. (145)

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

Another blow to the environment as pointed by 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 and navigation 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 Medha Patkar and Baba Amte. Roy participated actively in this andolan (movement) and donated her Booker Prize money for the same. She also appeared in *Drowned Out* (2002), a documentary by Franny 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 Jantar Mantar describes graphically the reality behind massive dam construction and its aftermath by means of his dream:

In his dream he had enough money to feed himself and send a little home to his family in his village. In his dream his village still existed. It wasn't at the bottom of a dam reservoir. Fish didn't swim through his windows. Crocodiles didn't knife through the high branches of the Silk Cotton trees. Tourists didn't go boating over his fields, leaving rainbow clouds of diesel in the sky. In his dream his brother Luariya wasn't a tour-guide at the dam-site whose job was to showcase the miracles the dam had wrought. His mother didn't work as a sweeper in a dam-engineer's house that was built on the land that she once owned. She didn't have to steal mangoes from her own trees. She didn't live in a resettlement colony in a tin hut with tin walls and a tin roof that was so hot you could fry onions on it. In Gulabiya's dream his river was still flowing, still alive. Naked children still sat on rocks, playing the flute, diving into the water to swim among the buffaloes when the sun grew too hot. (113)

The dream of one man reflects the reality of multitudes. 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. Tilottama, an unconventional and defiant architect. She wishes to "un-know" certain facts about the deaths 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 a similar concern Roy throws light on the misery of migrant workers. These people are homeless and often forced to sleep on the pavements. They are routinely crushed to death by reckless drivers. These men retire from, ". . . their day's work on the building site, their eyelashes and lungs pale with stone-dust from cutting stone and laying floors in the multi-storey shopping centres and housing estates springing up around the city like a fast-growing forest"

(256). 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 trade. The horrors involved in this trade cannot be easily documented. Impoverished tribal people are coerced by shrewd agents to send their children (specifically female children) to metropolises for sake of better livelihood. These tribal or adivasi girls are then forced into flesh trade, organ trafficking, surrogacy and slavery by the despotic agents who lure them to cities. One such adivasi child slave is introduced in the novel by Biplab who describes her saying:

The maid was obviously a Gond or a Santhal from Jharkhand or Chhattisgarh, or perhaps one of the aboriginal tribes in Orissa. She looked like a child of maybe fourteen or fifteen. (149)

An *Outlook* report by Dr. Vasavi Kiro titled, “No Escape from this Slave Trade,” draws attention towards a study conducted by Indian Social Institute which states that, “. . . 60 percent of girls placed in Delhi as domestic helps—or ‘maidservants’, to remove the veneer of politeness—are from Jharkhand alone. The rest of the girls are from other states like Orissa, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Assam, West Bengal etc” (n.pag.). The adivasi tribal groups form an important part of Indian indigenous population. According to 2011 census of India, the adivasis constitute 8.6 percent of Indian population and Nepalese population. Hence, these people must be protected and their voices must be heard.

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 the animals or for feeding them harmful things. The animals are tortured for cheap entertainment by the visitors. In the zoo the Gibbon hung to the tree because its cage was littered and the hippo swam in a dirty pond. The condition of the zoo inmates as well as their cages is seriously flawed. The picture of the zoo in the novel does not serve as an asylum for the animals. The narrator further alleges that:

There was an Indian rock python in every cage in the snake house. Snake scam. There were cows in the sambar stag’s enclosure. Deer scam. And there were women construction workers carrying bags of cement in the Siberian tiger enclosure. Siberian tiger scam. Most of the birds in the aviary were ones you could see on trees anyway. Bird scam. (235)

This sums up the grim picture of the zoo and of its inhabitants. Corruption is a ubiquitous phenomenon in India and the scams are common. Another issue of significance that surfaces in this novel is related to the genetic modification of animals. This process is scientifically called Transgenics. The genetically modified trout called the mutant-trout has more abdominal muscles

and hence more flesh. Similarly the genetically modified pig has a huge body. It is a double-muscled pig that is created by mutating the myostatin gene (MSTN). The ethical side of such experimentation has been questioned by the author asserting that, "These days one is never sure whether a bull is a dog, or an ear of corn is actually a leg of pork or a beef steak. But perhaps this is the path of genuine modernity?" (299). She also draws attention towards the advancements in poultry industry by asserting that, "I have learned that scientists working in the poultry industry are trying to excise the mothering instinct in hens in order to mitigate or entirely remove their desire to brood" (299). According to American agronomist and botanist Paul C. Mangelsdorf, "The genetic egg-laying potential of chickens has been further increased by largely eliminating, through selection, the brooding instinct. Modern hens in modern environments are virtually egg-laying machines"(67). This clearly unveils the cruelty to which the animals are subjected in the name of scientific progress.

The narrator then travels across the city reaching a massive dumping ground where she observes, ". . . miles of city waste, a bright landfill of compacted plastic bags with an army of ragged children picking through it. . . . In the distance, garbage trucks wound their way slowly up the garbage mountain" (*TMUH* 234). These dumping grounds have no waste recycling units to manage waste and the garbage keeps smoldering due to emission of methane from decaying waste products. These toxic gases poison the air and lead to heavy rain of smog. She then goes to the riverfront where she watches, ". . . a man row a circular raft built with old mineral-water bottles and plastic jerrycans across the thick, slow, filthy river" (234). At another point in the novel the condition of the ailing population of the city is described:

. . . two hospitals so full of sickness that patients and their families had spilled out and were camped on the roads. Some were on makeshift beds and in wheelchairs. Some wore hospital gowns and had bandages and IV drips. Children, bald from chemotherapy, wore hospital masks and clung to their empty-eyed parents. (136)

The poor sanitation facilities coupled with deteriorating environmental conditions caused widespread illness and elevated the mortality rate. The state authorities play a vital role in neglecting this widespread misery. In this regard Susan Comfort contends that, "As Roy attacks the patterns of uneven development within India and the state as an agent of this process, she also argues that these patterns are established in a transnational context as well" (135). The state machinery does not work for the upliftment of the masses. It is indeed an institution that serves the interests of the privileged class of the social structure. On the one hand, common people are denied basic amenities by the state authorities, on the other the privileged few are allowed to avail all state-sponsored benefits and facilities.

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* the presence of the unconsoled is overwhelming. Every heart-wrenching account in the narrative leads to the unconsoled and suffering people. Their dilemma shakes the paralyzed conscience of the powerful and privileged. The unconsoled

are those who bear the brunt of environmental degradation, they are those whose agony is the inescapable byproduct of the socio-political turmoil and state sponsored violence in form of infamous Gujarat riots, Kashmir insurgency, communal fanaticism, cow vigilantism, displacement of farmers and the Maoist struggle. They are the people who have been deliberately silenced and marginalized from the mainstream to the periphery like the untouchables (Dalits), the poverty-stricken, the tribal (Adivasis), the transgender (hijra) and in some cases women as well the elderly. This novel seeks consolation for all those people who are unconsolated. Arundhati Roy tries to achieve collective well-being by means of her writings. She interweaves environmental concerns in the fabric of her narrative with precision. The author tries to capture the deteriorating condition of the environment with her enigmatic narrative and literalism. Like Roy, the cult of environmental writing has been repeatedly revived by Indian writers such as Raja Rao, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Amitav Ghosh and Kiran Desai. These authors often analyse the relationship between nature and humans. They have frequently expressed their views regarding the exploitation of nature and the way this phenomenon corrodes the lives of the people involved. It can rightly be concluded that 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 condition of the environment. The themes and concerns navigated in this paper broaden the scope of research in the area of literary environmentalism. This paper also aims to arouse the lobotomized government machinery to take heed of the issues delineated by Roy. She inspires the readers to delve into the environmental problematic and detect ways to protect the environment. Roy energetically aspires to make this planet more sustainable.

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