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An Analysis from the Perspectives of Postcolonial Ecocriticism of Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

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Abstract:

Since times immemorial literature has been mirroring up diversified phenomena of human civilization – love, war, revolution, ascendancy and descendancy etc. But in case of environmental degradation, literature has been very slow to imprint pernicious effect of it. Though late, literature has not failed to uphold the very cause of environmental concern. Arundhati Roy, the highly acclaimed postcolonial writer of Indian English Literature, amplifies her ecological concern in her fictional and non-fictional works. This paper intends to objectify her concern for environmental degradation and her clarion call for her readers to save the earth from impending dangers. Her latest novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, draws out the issues of the deteriorated condition of river due to construction of dams and the sewage system of industrial wastages, the ‘otherness’ of animals, birds, fishes and trees and their easy exploitation, the wiping out of sparrow, vulture from biodiversity due to excessive scientific manifestations, the predicament of zoo animals, the abolition of forest for the steel and mining factories and the uselessness of nuclear testing etc. The author unravels that most of the environmental delapidations are the result of Euro-American ideology of ‘development’ project which is a disguised form of neo-colonialism and imperialism.

Keywords: Ecological imperialism, altruism, postcolonial ecocriticism, anthropocentrism.

Introduction:

Ecocriticism is a hypernym used to delegate the study of literature, art and theories of environmentally committed study. Its main concern is the treatment of nature and ecological subject in literature and art form. It mets out various ecological problems like, global warming, climate change, pollution, extinction of species and exploitation of non-human. Arundhati Roy's much awaited novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* investigates the current environmental problems and my whole-hearted endeavour in this paper is to showcase Roy's influential task in the light of postcolonial ecocriticism.

Before further textual explanation, it is very important to throw some light on postcolonialism and the postcolonial eco-criticism. Postcolonialism is a kind of resistance against dominant discourse which gives a grand narration of colonial history. It helps to break the dominant literary canon and 'rewrites a particular version of history or challenges a forceful commonplace view of politics' (TPL, 3). The same case happens with the postcolonial eco-critics and theorists who choose the same path and unfasten Euro-American imperial policy that Alfred Crosby terms '*ecological imperialism*'. It becomes very easy under the guise of 'development' of the underdeveloping countries. Cheryl Glotfelty defines ecocriticism in the following way:

Simply put, eco-criticism is the study of relationship between literature and physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of text, eco-criticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies (XVIII).

Postcolonial ecocritics, Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin draw out Indian ecocritic Guha's suggestion that it is very necessary 'to bring postcolonial and ecocritical issues together as a means of challenging continuing imperialist mode of social and environmental dominance'(2). They also argue that :

Postcolonial studies have come to understand environmental issues not only as central to the projects of European conquest and global domination, but also inherent in the ideologies of imperialism and racism on which those project historically – and persistently – depend (2).

Anthropocentric European civilization took non-European native as part of nature and easily assessable to exploitation like non-human species. Roy expresses her deep concern for detrimental condition of ecology and its impact on human life. She locates the wiping out of endangered species (vulture, sparrow), the influence of dam project (Narmada dam), urbanization, disastrous life of Bhupal Gas victim (MIC), the eviction of Adivasi (Baster) from their place for mining company and disastrous flood in Kashmir which are the cause of environmental degradation.

At the very beginning I have acknowledged that literature is mirroring up various societal phenomena - its glorious moments and its dismal sides. Arundhati Roy also catches every glance of deteriorating condition of environment and portrays the horrid picture of environmental crisis in all her writings. The novelist in her recent novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* has shown this in an unobtrusive way and demands a sharp and scholastic observation from the readers. The novel opens with a prologue and the prologue provides author's concern for lower species. The unquenchable thirst of human beings has led the demise of 'white-baked vulture', the scavengers of dead and

the death of sparrow due to environmental changes, - “sparrow that have gone missing, and the old white-baked vultures custodians of dead for more than a hundred years, that have been wiped out,” (1). Roy ironically criticises the wiping out of vulture for the use of diclofenac, and cow aspirin which are given to cow for muscle pain relaxation and for the extraction of more milk. Diclofenac produces a poisonous effect on cow’s body that brings death for the vultures who eat the dead of ‘chemically relaxed, milk-producing cow or buffalo’(1). The author ridicules that “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...”(1).

Murray Bookchin in his 1952 essay, *The Problems of Chemicals in Food*, analyses the effect of chemicals in human body. The chemicals which are used as fertilizer actually enter into human body through food chain. The same happened in the case of vultures also. Bookchin asserts that the extreme use of chemicals in cultivation and food processing have been introduced by United States. He is of the view that modern capitalist civilization brings an existentialist threat to human and non- human lives in the earth.

Postcolonial ecocritics, Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, in their book, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* , opine that :

...radical Third-Worldist critiques tend to see development as little more than a disguised form of neocolonialism, a vast technocratic apparatus designed primarily to serve the economic and political interest of West (27).

Roy attacks the development project of Third World countries by the First World countries which is the best way of strategic ‘altruism’ that indirectly accelerates their (First World) financial progress. The author expresses her anxiety for the violation of natural order due to the production of massive dam that controls the natural flow of river. The controlling of natural flow of river for the seemingly beneficiary of men proved disastrous for human being. She talks about Narmada Valley Development Project that is ‘India’s Greatest Planned Environmental Disaster’. The dam had been built for the benevolence of three states, Gujrat, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. The end of the project was to provide electricity and pure drinking water for commoners. At the same time, it aimed to irrigate millions of hectares of infertile agricultural fields. The result was not so good as it demanded at the onset. It ousted hundreds of thousands of local people, mostly Adivasis without any rehabilitation. It had done an irreparable damage to their daily lives, their economic independence, and their cultural life. The project consumes more electricity than it produces and also causes for flood that damage the irrigation system instead of helping it. The immense cost of the project, thrusts the country into a great debt to World Bank that indirectly pushes the country into a never ending economic bondage.

Roy expresses the failure of the projects with ironic musicality of her narration, -“ rivers were bottled and sold in super market, fish were tinned, mountains mined and turned into shinning missiles, Massive dams lit up the cities like Christ-mass trees. Everyone was happy”(98). Like exploitation of the Third World countries by the First World countries on the issue of development, the poor, who are akin to nature, are also exploited by the elite class. Roy quotes here the wretched condition of the poor and villagers and the slum dwellers who are evicted from their place on the name of development project, -“villages were being emptied, cities too, millions of people were being moved, but nobody knew where to” (98). The author outspeaks the dismal sides of modernisation where city's outskirts are filled with industrial wastages and “in the miles of bright swamp tightly compacted with refuse and colourful plastic bags... the air was chemical and the water poisonous. Clouds of mosquitoes rose up from thick green pond” (100).

The author registers Gulabiya Vechania's dreamy vision in this way :

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. There were leopard and sambar and sloth bear in the Sal forest that clothed the hill above the village where during festivals his people would gather with their drums to drink and dance for days (113).

This place was like a 'happy meadow' for them but now his place is in street where he could only dream his nostalgic past. Now Gulabiya's house is under water where fishes 'swim through his windows', crocodiles 'knife through the high branches of the Silk Cotton trees', tourists 'go boating over his fields, leaving rainbow clouds of diesel in the sky' (113). Patricia Waugh in her *Literary Theory and Criticism* argues :

'The environmental justice movement' is a collective term for the effort of poor communities to defend themselves against the dumping of toxic waste, the harmful contamination of their air, food and water and the loss of their lands and livelihoods and the indifferences of governments and corporations. Ecocritics responsive to environmental justice will bring questions of class, race, gender and colonialism into the ecocritical evaluation of text and ideas, challenging versions of environmentalism that seem exclusively preoccupied with preservation of wild nature and ignore the aspiration of the poor (531).

In her essays she (Roy) reiterates about Nature's wrath. We exploit nature for our own cause/benefit and try to change its course by the help of science. So, nature also takes its revenge by flood, tsunami, earthquake and various natural hazards. Gulabiya is now homeless, his home is now under water but the people like him are not responsible for the change but they suffer most instead of them who have done the damage. Arundhati Roy

repeatedly reminds us about this kind of '*environmental justice*' and depicts the gathering of the deprived section in Jantar Mantar. Neither the Government nor the media give them enough importance.

Arundhati Roy is a raucous commentator of India's nuclear testing and explosion of missile. In her essay, she apprehends the cataclysmic impact of nuclear war and says :

If there is a nuclear war, our foes will not be China or America or even each other. Our foe will be – the sky, the air, the land, the wind and water – will all turn against us. Their wrath will be terrible (TEI, 46).

The very idea of nuclear testing and missile explosion emerged from the First-World nations. The author points out the futility of the Theory of Deterrence where people are not aware about the effect of nuclear explosion. So, the show off of atomic ammunitions is not able to bring any permanent solution to the national security, rather it affects largely to the environment. The novel delimitates the depredation of nuclear war several times, sometimes in the speech of Dr. Azad Bharatia and sometimes Biplad Das Gupta, Goose da.

Like Ramachandra Guha and Sundarlal Bahuguna, Roy also acknowledges modern materialistic civilization as the root cause for ecological imbalance. They regard that modern materialistic civilization 'makes man the butcher of Earth'. In her present novel the author talks against the anthropocentrism which is inseparably connected to Eurocentrism. Modern development policy left no place for the non-human species to live peacefully. The author mentions here a place, Hauz Khas, in South Delhi where "a cow that had died – burst – from eating too many plastic bags at the main garbage dump" (264). The overcrowded, unhygienic, non-eco-friendly atmosphere of city left nothing for the lower species except plastic to eat. She also gives a depiction of a frozen crow in mid-air. Zainab was terrified by the sight of the frozen crow which was hanging in mid-air like a feathered Christ. The mystery was discovered later and the incident was the result of new Chinese string. The string was 'made of tough, transparent plastic, coated with ground glass' (404). She angrily delineates men's callous behaviour or attitude that causes demolition of lower species from bio-diversity.

Arundhati Roy renders the addle-headedness of Zainab for the lower species whereas most of the people are busy to slaughter them. The novel perfectly incarnates the place and importance of non-human species in ecology. The author affectionately calls Zainab, 'a terror on the streets of the city' because she never likes any animal or bird to be caged. She freed all 'the half-bald, half-dead white chickens' in the butcher's shops. She took all the cats and puppies from the streets though they were regarded as '*najis*' for Muslims. For the first time a goat faced a natural death and it spent

sixteenth Bakr-id unslaughtered for its mistress Zainab. The author urges this kind of love for the lower species and nature. At the later stage Zainab and Saddam Hussain jointly turned the Graveyard into a little zoo – ‘a Noah’s Ark of injured animals’ where all the injured and old animals could take refuge. Her graveyard zoo were full of a young peacock who could not fly, a peahen and three old cows, the budgerigars that were freed by Zainab from a bird-seller, a small tortoise, a lame donkey, Payal, the mare and an old dog Biroo and Comrade Laali and their multiple progenitors. Finally the Graveyard became the perfect place for the rejected and battered soul, the shelter for all who do not suit into the normal dunia’s rules and regulations. Harvard entomologist Edward O. Wilson acknowledges that most probably 27,000 various living species are vanishing from bio-diversity every year. He also assumes that around 20 % of present species along with flora and fauna are surely on the verge of destruction within the next thirty years and he specifies human beings as the major agent for this destruction. Human beings are the only species who harm other species.

Roy comments on the absurdity of preservation, where they are tortured in the name of better rehabilitation. She telescopes the dismal life of zoo animal where authorities are only pretending of their wellbeing. They are tortured by the visitors for mere entertainment. She visualises the predicament of the Gibbon who is living on tree for its littered cage, and Hippo is swimming in a dirty pond. The zoo authorities are totally failure to provide proper space for them. The author also comments on unethical modernisation process that changes the natural shape and figure of lower species, -

Two bulls live in the service lane outside my flat. In the daytime, they appear quite normal but at night they grow tall...When they piss, they lift their legs like dogs...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).

The author also seeks the reader’s attention to the excessive advancements in the poultry industry and says :

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. Their goal, apparently, is to stop chickens wasting time on unnecessary things and thereby to increase the efficiency of egg production (299).

In the guise of scientific progress or hybridity, these animals face innumerable cruelty by the greedy people’s hand.

Professors, Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, substantiate that “ the very ideology of colonisation is thus one where anthropocentrism and Eurocentrism are inseparable, with the anthropocentrism underlying Eurocentrism being used to justify those forms of European colonialism that see indigenous culture as “primitive”, less rational, and closer to children, animal and nature” (5). By comparing the pre-colonised nations with children and animal, they make them vulnerable for easy exploitation. Arundhati Roy speaks about this kind of exploitation of Adivasis and poor by the present elite class which was fostered by the Euro-American imperialism. In this fiction Revathy, a maou activist from Baster, discloses the plight of Adivasis in Baster. She (Revathy) portrays the destruction of wilderness by the modern technology. The eviction of the people who are purely akin to nature by the political leaders for their own benefit, is another example of plunder of nature. Revathy says that “they want adivasi people to vacate forest so they can make a steel township and mining” (421). Pablo Mukherjee in his book asserts that the very formula of land acquisition is executed under the aegis of British Land Acquisition Act. This old law of British is used now in India for technological and industrial advancement. This law suspends the civil rights of state protection and welfare and helps them in easy eviction.

Postcolonial ecocritics acknowledge that it is not possible to examine existing imperialism and colonialism except its association with voluminous scale of environmental eradication that they imply. Arundhati Roy also comments on the American imperial policy to show the hazardous effect it had done on environment. The author lambasts the Bhopal Gas Disaster. The Bhopal Gas disaster was a gas leak incident which happened in 1984 at the Union Carbide India Limited (UCIL), a pesticide plant in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh. It is considered as the world’s worst industrial disaster. Thousands people were killed and maimed because of MIC gas and other Chemical explosion. At the later stage it was proved that the company belonged to an American company and its Chairman and CEO Warren Martin Anderson was not answerable to the Indian court. So many cases were lodged, yet the CEO has been able to bypass punishment. Roy attacks this disaster in this novel because the incident left many people amputated and permanently ill with so many incurable diseases. She depicts the plight of those people through her spokesperson Dr. Azad Bharatia when he speaks :

That Gas-Leak company has a new name Dow Chemicals. But these poor people who were destroyed by them, can they buy new lungs, new eyes? They have to manage with their same old organs, which were poisoned so many years ago. But nobody cares (130).

The Wordsworthian ecocritical concept was that Nature never did betray the person that love her and it is very much true in case of Roy’s protagonist, Anjum. She took refuge in Graveyard after rejection and humiliation from the so called ‘*dunia*’. This wild and wizard place became perfect place for her happiness. The author

also compares her with an old tree in a Graveyard. Roy highlights the nature/culture dichotomy through the exploitation and humiliation of Anjum by the people. Like a tree she was stoned, scratched but she never bowed down to see 'which small boy had thrown a stone at her' (3). She never minded the humiliation and shedded all her humiliations as a tree sheds its leaves. The author portrays the durability of tree/nature. We, the people, always fulfil our necessity from it but never do anything in return.

Roy portrays the artificial love of human being. Basically the artists are not getting inspiration now from nature, rather they are inclining towards the modern scientific technologies. The author depicts here the creation of an artist from Berlin. Saddam Hussain was given the sole charge for the maintenance of exhibition. It was the exhibition of "everyday artefacts made of stainless steel – cistern, steel motorcycle, steel weighing scales with fruit on one side and steel weights on the other, steel plates and steel food, a steel taxi with steel luggage on its steel luggage rack..." (75). There was also a gigantic stainless-steel Banyan tree. The displacement of nature with artificiality affected none but the poor Saddam. He had the charge of cleaning Banyan tree and the reflection of sunlight damaged his vision seriously. That caused his elimination from the job of security guard. The author again and again highlights the exploitation of nature from the powerful one but the sufferers are those who are extremely entangled with nature for their living.

Roy gives another account of ecosystemic imbalance in Kashmir Valley. The overflowing immense water of Jhilam breached its bank and sank the whole housing colonies, army camps, torture centres, hospitals, courthouses, and police stations. The flood destroyed thousands of lives, public and private properties. The flood occurred due to environmental degradation, the melting of glacier for global warming and the erosion of soil because of deforestation. This is the clear sign of why all these things are happening.

Conclusion:

Thus Arundhati Roy has expressed her libertarian and ecological ideas in a penetrative way in this novel. The present novel criticizes the development and questions the state-oriented policy and betrays the root cause of ecological problems and explores the after-effect of dominating nature. She caters the whole world by hinting solutions to the ecological problems prevalent in the present world. She tries whole-heartedly to save the costly lives of the people of this world by creating an eco-consciousness among readers. Arundhati Roy's only concern is to create public awareness about environmental degradation and its negative impact of human life and other species through her writings. And as a responsible writer she has penned her experience beautifully in her present novel and successfully decodes the ecological imperialism of First World nations.

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