

IMPACT FACTOR: 7.86

ISSN0976-8165

THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

13 Years of Open Access

Vol. 13 Issue-II APRIL 2022

Bi-monthly Peer-Reviewed e-Journal

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Ecocriticism and Power Politics in Arundhati Roy's Select Works

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Article History: Submitted-31/03/2022, Revised-19/04/2022, Accepted-20/04/2022, Published-30/04/2022.

Abstract:

Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and physical world. The second-wave ecocriticism in literary studies which emphasizes present day environmental concerns in contrast to first-wave ecocriticism's dealing with pastoral and romantic nature writings is politically inscribed. The present-day ecocriticism is very close to power politics. This paper endeavours to prove this dictum, and to achieve this purpose some of the political essays and the novel *The God of Small Things* of Arundhati Roy are critically analyzed in the light of Marxist ecocriticism.

Keywords: ecocriticism, environmental, Marxist, power politics, capitalist, preservation, nuclear bomb, movement.

Ecocriticism as a literary theory emerged in the late 1980s. Cheryll Glotfelty in the edited book *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* gives a comprehensive definition of ecocriticism: "Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii). Ecocriticism is an earth-centered approach to literary studies. Before Glotfelty William H. Rueckhert used the term 'ecocriticism' by which he meant "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature" (*Literature and Ecology* 71-86).

An ecocritical text is concerned with environmental damage and political struggle to protect ecology. The ecocritic Lawrence Buell in his text *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (2005), talks about two waves of ecocriticism. The first wave ecocriticism refers to the older environmental criticism of the twentieth century that reread and examined "nature writing" of the nineteenth century such as writings of Margaret

Fuller, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau in the USA, and the writings of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats and other British romantic poets. The second-wave ecocriticism is a recent one which focuses on more current works such as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962). The second-wave ecocriticism, dating from the late 1990s, gives less emphasis on the pastoral and Romantic American and British authors, but its emphasis is on present day environmental concerns. The second-wave ecocriticism, to some extent, is politically inscribed. The Welsh author-critic Richard Kerridge, in his essay "Environmentalism and Ecocriticism", states that the second-wave ecocriticism is basically the 'environmental justice movement' which is described as "a collective term for the efforts of poor communities to defend themselves against the dumping of toxic waste, the harmful contamination of their air, food, and water, the loss of their lands and livelihood, and the indifference of governments and corporations" (531). He further states, "Ecocritics responsive to environmental justice will bring questions of class, race, gender, and colonialism into the ecocritical evaluation of texts and ideas, challenging versions of environmentalism that seem exclusively preoccupied with preservation of wild nature and ignore the aspirations of the poor" (531).

The Marxist ideal that the production must be geared in conformity with the real needs of the people rather than accumulation of wealth was thrown by the capitalists who move towards profit generation, and hereafter they exploit the environment. To the capitalists nature has become commodity and source of profits. In the age of globalization, spots of production move to Third World countries where the capitalists have the opportunity to over-exploit both nature and labour. Indian historian and thinker Ramchandra Guha links poverty with ecological degradation, especially in the countries of Asia and Africa. The First World capitalist countries with the help of International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank exploit the environment of the Third World by genetically engineered seeds, the use of fertilizers, mining and patents. In the name of development, free market economy, trade agreements, patent rights and subsidy policies the First World developed countries badly affect agrarian practices and social righteousness in the Third World countries. The First World's waste dumping to the Third World and mining practices often have an ethnic measurement. When the First World environmentalism is all about the preservation of wildness, Indian environmental justice movements such as '*Chipko Movement*' and '*Narmada Bachao Andolan*' are about the preservation of eco-systems that help the poorer sections of society survive.

Arundhati Roy is an eminent Indian essayist, novelist and a social activist who believes that a writer should not be neutral in the time of crisis for the nation and its citizens. He/she must play a significant role in exposing for the common people the exploitative strategies and policies made by the professionals appointed by the rulers to suppress them. A writer being a conscious and dutiful citizen must claim information, data, statistics and explanation of any strategy and policy which the government is unwilling to make public. Just after *The God of Small Things* she wrote a political essay, 'The End of Imagination', on India's nuclear test in Pokhran on May 11 and 13, 1998. The government with the help of electronic and print media- newspapers, TV talk shows, radio broadcastings, etc. - was successful in incorporating and transferring its ideology of 'nationalism' to the masses. Therefore, in the name of nationalism, a majority of Indian citizens had put aside the devastating aftermath of the detonation of nuclear bomb, and celebrated believing it a moment of pride for India. Ms. Roy terms this euphoria as jingoistic nationalism. She shows that the detonation of nuclear bombs has not only the debilitating physical and psychological effects, but it has also devastating and dangerous impact on India and Pakistan's ecosystem.

She comments on the consequences of the detonation of nuclear bombs in Pokhran:

Though we are separate countries, we share skies, we share winds, we share water. Where radioactive fallout will land on any given day depends on the direction of the wind and rain. Lahore and Amritsar are thirty miles apart. If we bomb Lahore, Punjab will burn. If we bomb Karachi, then Gujarat and Rajasthan, perhaps even Bombay, will burn. Any nuclear war with Pakistan will be a war against ourselves. (*Algebra* 24)

She makes the people aware about the perilous effects of nuclear war:

If there is a nuclear war, our foes will not be China or America or even each other. Our foe will be the earth herself. The very elements—the sky, the air, the land, the wind and water—will all turn against us. Their wrath will be terrible. (5-6)

Ms. Roy through her influential essays, 'The Greater Common Good' and 'The Road to Harsud' exposes the hypocrisy of the Indian Government and the World Bank that permit and promote the building of big dams without thinking of hostile ecological impact on men, women and animals.

India, the third largest builder of Big Dams in the world, has currently more than three thousand and six hundred big dams. Ms. Roy explains the obsolete and hazardous impacts of building big dams, and shows how the building of big dams serves the interest of corporates and capitalists. She believes that Big Dams are “a brazen means of taking water, land and irrigation away from the poor and gifting it to the rich” (57). The government is successful in convincing the Nehru's dictum to the people of India, ‘Big Dams are the Temples of Modern India’.

The poor and underprivileged people like *dalits* and *adivasis* are the worst sufferers who are massively and badly affected in many ways – social, economic and ecological levels. The Government of India does not give a fig about the lives of these poor people. They have been uprooted and displaced from their own lands without any proper compensation and rehabilitation. The Indian Institute of Public Administration made a survey to estimate the total number of displaced people due to building of big dams, and it is found that nearly thirty-three million have been uprooted. The Secretary to the Planning Commission, Mr. N.C. Saxena estimates: “the number was in the region of fifty million (of whom forty million were displaced by dams)” (61).

The government's logic that the big dams give guarantee to India's food security is proved false by the report of Himanshu Thakkar that clearly confirms only twelve percent of total food grain production of India. Ms. Roy brings the data: in 1995, “the state granaries were overflowing with thirty million tonnes of food grain, while at the same time 350 million people lived below the poverty line” (67-68).

The Narmada Valley Development Project that undertakes for building some prominent big dams such as the Bargi Dam, the Sardar Sarovar reservoir, the Narmada Sagar dam, etc. has the capability to change the ecology of the entire Narmada basin that can “submerge and destroy 4,000 square kilometres of natural deciduous forest” (75-76).

The Bargi Dam under the Narmada Valley Development Project “submerged three times more land than the engineers said it would” (84), but it “irrigates only as much land as it submerged in the first place—and only five percent of the area that its planners claimed it would irrigate. Even that is now waterlogged” (85). The Sardar Sarovar reservoir can submerge about “13,000 hectares of prime forest land”, and between Narmada Sagar dam and the Sardar Sarovar dam, “50,000 hectares of old-growth broadleaved forest will be submerged” (115). The Narmada Sagar dam, the

largest in India, is the most destructive river dam. This dam has a perilous impact not only on human beings, but it appears fatal to wildlife and ecosystem of that area. The objective for building this dam is to “irrigate 1,23,000 hectares of land, it will submerge 91,000 hectares! This includes 41,000 hectares of prime dry deciduous forest, 249 villages and the town of Harsud” (Road to Harsud 244).

Opposing the building of big dams, there has been dissidence all over India, and the displaced people, social activists, environmentalists, ecologists and nature lovers have been able to exert force on the World Bank to form a commission to assess human cost and the adverse ecological effects of big dams.

As said earlier, the Narmada Sagar is the highly destructive to human beings as well as wildlife and ecosystem of the command areas. Ms. Roy refers: “The Wild Life Institute of India, Dehradun, warned of the loss of a vast reservoir of bio-diversity, wildlife and rare medicinal plants” (245). She also quotes from 1994 Impact Assessment Report to the Ministry of Environment: “The compensation of the combined adversarial impacts of the Narmada Sagar Project and the Omkareshwar Project is neither possible nor is being suggested” (245).

The Single Authority formed by the Narmada Valley Development Project forced the farmers to cultivate cash crops, and discouraged to cultivate cereal crops. The massive mass resistance forced the World Bank to withdraw from the project. A huge amount of money is needed to complete the project. Therefore, the Single Authority planned to establish golf-courses, five-star hotels and water parks to raise money. The single Authority’s decision is dangerous for the ecosystem of that area, because it replaces forests by hotels, golf-courses and water parks. It’s a kind of urbanization process.

Roy is critical of court verdict that justifies the building of Sardar Sarovar dam. She calls the Indian judges the “divine beings” (Scandal in the Palace 16) who decide “what’s good for the environment and what isn’t, whether dams should be built, rivers linked, mountains moved, forests felled” (14). Justice S.P. Bharucha is the only judge who has concern for ecological imbalance and asks for the suspension of building the Sardar Sarovar dam. He says: ““An environment clearance based on next to no data in regard to the environmental impact of the Project was contrary to the

terms of the then policy of the Union of India in regard to environmental clearances and, therefore, no clearance at all” (*Algebra* 139).

The forty percent of Delhi's total population who are either homeless or living in the unauthorized colonies and slums are treated by the Government of India as non-citizens that include “hawkers, rickshaw pullers, garbage recyclers, car-battery rechargers, street tailors, transistor knob makers, button hole stitchers, paper bag makers, dyers, printers, barbers” (*Algebra* 206-207) who are deprived of their basic facilities like water, electricity and sewage systems. Their means of livelihood is termed by the Supreme Court as illegal, polluting and non-conforming industrial units. Ms. Roy brings the statistics to dismiss the Court's claim: “sixty-seven percent of Delhi's pollution comes from motor vehicles” (208) and appeals to show “great enthusiasm for regulating big factories run by major industrialists that have polluted rivers, denuded forests, depleted and poisoned groundwater, and destroyed the livelihoods of thousands of people who depend on these resources for a living” (208).

Ms. Roy hits at the government and its faithful assistants, the big corporations that forcefully takeover the lands and homes of the tribal people living in Orissa, Chattisgarh and Jharkhand which are rich in minerals like bauxite, iron and other twenty-eight valuable mineral resources. And it is done without providing them with any proper compensation and rehabilitation. The big corporations extract minerals from those lands of the tribals through deforestation without thinking adverse ecological impact of it. They identify “1, 40,000 hectares of prime land to give to industrialists for more than 300 Special Economic Zones, India's onshore tax havens for the rich” (40).

Ms. Roy's environmental concern is also reflected in her first novel *The God of Small Things*. In this novel she shows how a live and speedy river turns into a ‘swollen drain’ in the hands of greedy capitalists. Meenachal river is the life line of the people of Ayemenem. The politically influential paddy farmers convert this once destructive, fearful and speedy river into a skull.

Downriver, a saltwater barrage had been built, in exchange for votes from the influential paddy-farmer lobby. The barrage regulated the inflow of saltwater from

the backwaters that opened into the Arabian Sea. So now they had two harvests a year instead of one. More rice, for the price of a river. (God of Small Things 124)

Even in the rainy season, the river possesses a “thin ribbon of thick water” on which the dead fish are seen. Industrial chemical wastages, uses of fertilizers, insecticides and pesticides are the causes of death of the fish in Meenachal river. The banks of the river are intoxicated with “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 Meenachal river carries putrid garbage, plastic bags and weeds to the sea. In the ‘God’s Own Country’ section of the novel, Ms. Roy shows how the rich and the capitalists exploit natural resources for their own luxury. She exposes the colonial strategy of exploiting natural resources of the third world countries leaving the perilous impacts on the people of the colonized nations.

Ms. Roy shows that the capitalists with the help of the governments devour the world like octopus. They think of profit only. They are very least bothered about the environmental crisis across world. Environmental crisis is the world crisis. In this time of crisis, she appeals for a dissidence against the man-made ecological devastation.

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