

BIOETHICAL CONCERNS IN ARUNDHATI ROY: A STUDY OF SELECT WORKS OF NON- FICTION

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We stand now where two roads diverge. But unlike the roads in Robert Frost's familiar poem, they are not equally fair. the one less traveled by offers our last, our only chance to reach a destination that assures the preservation of the earth (Rachel Carson).

Concerns regarding the environment are not a very recent trend. Literary discourses of the past have dealt with environment as a matter of concern for centuries. It is generally believed that it was Rachel Carson who successfully projected environmental threats to life on earth. Her book *The Silent Spring* (1962) reveals her great love and concern for nature. But even before the nineteenth century, the English Romantic poets had shown deep interest in safeguarding the environment and interacting with it. Several of their works focused on celebrating nature. England witnessed the clarion call for conservation of nature in the works of Romantic poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge. These nature poets were greatly aware of the responsibility vested in their hands as writers, and their poems can be taken as examples of "romantic pantheism," as they upheld a mode of life which worshipped nature (Roe 697).

The Romantics showed their genuine concern and also inspired interests through their works for the environment. They fostered a deep love for nature. They seemed to have been endowed with the power to foresee the selfish turn man is going to adopt, as life advanced. Wordsworth, in one of his poems, writes about the futility

of material life: “The world is too much with us . . . / Getting and spending we lay waste our powers” (1-2). He was trying to warn man against proceeding in life with vested interests and the fretful fever of life which will not redeem him. The Romantics felt that the rat-race will not fetch man fulfillment in life. They advocated a “[h]armonious co-existence with nature,” which will lead life on in the universe (Roe 203).

Arundhati Roy's repeated pronouncements on environmental hazards in her non-fictional works are reminiscent of the words of Henry David Thoreau: “As a single footstep will not make a path on the earth, so a single thought will not make a pathway in the mind” ([www.azquotes.com /author/14637-Henry_David_Thoreau](http://www.azquotes.com/author/14637-Henry_David_Thoreau)). With the intention of creating a deeper and wider path for herself and all nature lovers, Roy devotes several of her non-fictional works to bioethical concerns. Her prophetic harping on the careless violence of man against nature is not heeded by the power structures. Several of her works draw attention to eco-concerns, with the objective of gathering forces against short-sighted political actions against nature.

Roy, in her essays and interviews, seriously reflects on the insane measures taken in the name of development, by various governments of this nation. In her interview with David Barsamian, titled “The Colonization of Knowledge,” she asserts that, this “development debate is a scam” (47). She feels that claims to development “with a lack of imagination” will be catastrophic. Though a writer herself, she feels that she cannot hold herself back from activism because she finds that the “voiceless” victims needed her support (*Conversations* 64). She is of the conviction that her education makes her privileged and gives her a vantage point to describe the plight of the victims of the so-called development.

Roy's essay "Mr. Chidambaram's War" comes with a rhetorical question, which sums up her tirade against exploitation of nature: "Can we leave the bauxite in the mountain?" (*Broken Republic* 24). This has a rebounding effect and challenges man to find a different path for development. She talks about the flat-topped hills which overlooked Dongria Kondh in Orissa. The hills were looked upon as gods by the local inhabitants. But the hills have been sold for the bauxite they contain" (3). Gods, it seems, have been sold for their bauxites to a multinational company with a belying name 'Vedanta.' Along with the hills would disappear, the forests, rivers and streams and, finally, the tribal people. The local people wonder if gods would have been sold off, if they had been Ram, or Allah, or Christ.

Arundhati Roy, though best known for the Booker Prize-winning novel, *God of Small Things*, claims that she had already written political essays even before writing the novel. Yet, the novel helped her to evolve from writer to an activist with ecological concerns. The strange response from the Narmada Bachao Andolan activists to her novel launched her strongly on a warpath against the corrupters of the earth. They surprised her with the statement, "We know that you would be against big dams and the World Bank when we read the *God of Small Things*" (*Conversations* 49). Not every writer turns into an activist. But Roy has evolved, and freely navigates between fiction, non-fiction, and activism. If she bases her non-fiction on ground realities, fictional terrain is no different to her. She claims that "fiction was the truest thing there ever was" (*Conversations* 44). She calls the trend of specialization bizarre and does not want to confine herself to any particular genre.

Roy's reverence for nature is a quality that she imbibed from the local people whose cause she has taken up. She is very much

against unwanted interventions in the ecosystem. She cites instances where certain missteps led to serious consequences. Her concerns are similar to those of Henry Thoreau, when he talks about the smaller creatures of nature. “Every creature” could be let to live than die, and “he who understands it aright will rather preserve its life than destroy it” (<https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/h/henrydavid105004.html>). In the North East of India, frog legs were being exported to France to earn foreign exchange. This had led to the paucity of frogs which, in turn, resulted in the increase of pests. These pests destroyed crops. After a few years, the damage done was understood, but nothing could be done to repair the damages. Man's refusal to celebrate the music of nature, to which all creatures, big and small, contribute in their own way, will only bring about destruction. Unwarranted interventions often result in damaging the natural cycle of events. One example would be the farmers in Tanzania shooting hippos that destroyed crops. The decrease in hippos resulted in the disappearance of fishes. Enquiry into the matter led to the finding that fishes used to lay eggs in the excreta of hippos. Such arrogant interventions in “ecosystem that you don't understand can be ruinous,” warns Roy (*Conversations* 49).

Roy has also examined the damaging effects of pesticides on nature. Initially, soil responds favourably to application of chemicals. After a point, the use of unnatural measures and pesticides will cause “the productivity of the land” to diminish” (49). Hence, food grains have to be imported. The farmers are compelled to invest more in pesticides and fertilizers so as to force “a little productivity out of these dead lands.” After the land dies, the next victims are the farmers themselves. They end up by killing themselves by drinking pesticides” (*Conversations* 49).

The writer-activist's fight is against enemies that are not in any way equal to her. To governments ruling India, she is a trivial opponent. Still, she continues her fight, using her powerful voice as a writer. She insists that all contracts signed between the governments and other foreign organizations pretend to have philanthropic interests but the actual results are devastating. Measures taken in the name of development only make the people all the more poor. The “development lobby” claims that mining industry will increase “the GDP growth dramatically” (“Mr. Chidambaram's War” 19) and provide employment to the people it displaces. “The catastrophic costs” to environment is not taken into account. The lion's share of the money reaches private pockets and less than 10% reaches public exchequer. The people displaced only get slave wages for doing “back breaking work” (Chidambaram 19).

Western concept of development is taming the wilderness; a triumph of the human soul. World Bank arbitrarily assumes that the Narmada Valley Project will have “an irrigation efficiency of 60 percent” and the dam, when constructed, will be of use to “all the politically powerful areas right up at the head of the canal (*Conversations* 48). Sugar would not be planted according to the terms, but “sugar factories have been licensed before the dam was built” and “huge five star hotels and golf courses have been built” (*Conversations* 51). Though tall claims were made by the exploitative power structures, the reality was that the dam can irrigate only 12% of the cultivable area of Kutch and 9% of Saurashtra. Roy points to the lack of social link between the people who make the decisions and the people who suffer the aftermath of these decisions. This particular model of development continues to pursue “the brutal path and ignores the consequence” (*Conversations* 55).

Narmada is so far away from Kutch and Saurashtra that it's "a joke to take all that water all the way up through Gujarat" (*Conversations* 52). It would indeed be a visionary measure to invest this amount in water-harvesting schemes. The Narmada Project submerged almost twice the government's projection - 70,000 people - and also washed clean 101 villages. The people displaced are not accounted for, as most are non-people according to the powers, the Adivasis, the Dalits. The author bases her analysis on fifty four dams done by the Indian Institute of Public Administration, where the number of reservoir-displaced came to an average of 44,000 people. The stark reality, according to her, is that, India has built 3,300 big dams which displaced 56 million. The people driven out of villages migrate to cities, "packed like lice into every crevice" and are again evicted at a moment's notice, "if an office complex or a five- star complex comes up. In several contexts the poor of India are non-entities which the series of governments do greatly ignore" (*Conversations* 58).

In "Chidambaram's War," Roy emphasizes that certain politicians who have had foreign education fail to be in tune with the thinking of the poor Indian villagers, who are depend on and worship natural resources. She justifies the tribespeople for taking up arms against a government that has given them nothing but violence and neglect. Through armed warfare, they only want to defend "the last thing" that they have, that is "their land," against those who show irreverence towards it (6). The tribal culture of safe guarding and reverencing nature has been described as "museum cultures" by the then Home Minister, P. Chidambaram ("Walking" 30). Museums being valuable assets of heritage protected by the community and government, such a usage, in the given context, becomes highly ironical.

Roy's war is also against the education that we have been provided with and the scientists who mislead people into believing that they can research and find results that are reliable. She is of the view that education sometimes makes people float even further away from things they ought to know about. It seems to actually obscure their vision. The kind of ignorance that people with PhDs display, she says, is unbelievable (45). Organizations like the World Bank probably employ more PhDs than the Universities in the world. This, in Roy's opinion, is indicative of the vested interests of such organizations. These researchers seem to be willing pawns in the hands of companies that fund them. Such funding agencies expect researches to endorse their exploitative plans that will bring benefit for them and it matters little when it brings ruin on the indigenous population. This kind of prejudiced and biased policies in higher education is actually crippling rather than enriching the country. People have to take it that “they're being robbed for their own good” like in the times of colonization (*Conversations* 46).

Roy is of the opinion that science cannot tackle all questions about the natural phenomena. Nature has dimensions which are inscrutable and it is never easy to explain the intricacies and the deeper realms that constitute it. She feels that certain things have to be left alone. There's a “kind of humility” in accepting that there are certain things in nature that are beyond the intellectual capacities of man (*Conversations* 50). The arrogance that Indian 'powers that be' get reflected in their violence against nature, and Roy feels this is an aftermath of colonization. The colonizers' oppression of Indian knowledge-structures is revealed in all the interventions against nature.

The Aborigines living in the different geographical regions

are in total harmony with their habitat. There is a kind of understanding with nature which is not decipherable to the external powers. To them, nature is above all gods, and they bring to memory the religion of early man, which was pantheism. “So while for the Adivasis the mountain is still a living deity, the fountain head of life and faith, the keystone of the ecological health of the region, for the corporation, it is just a cheap storage facility” (“Chidambaram's War” 17). This storage facility is something that could be dispensed with when it suits them. Nature's omnipotence is a thing that modern man finds difficult to accept.

Roy alerts her readers to the fact that they are also willing accomplices in the corporate 'war' against the tribals: “when we put money in a bank, it's going to fund the bombs and the dams ... when we pay tax we are investing in projects the people of the country are not happy with. ... All our hands are dirty” (*Conversations* 59). This allegation brings to mind the words spoken by Lady Macbeth as she sleepwalks: “Here's the smell of the blood still: All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand.” The difference is that Arundhati Roy is wide awake and is beckoning the like-minded to join the campaign to keep both the environment and their hands clean.

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