

# GREEN WRITINGS OF ARUNDHATI ROY

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**Abstract:** This paper is an effort for an ecocritical reading of Arundhati Roy's writings – the novel *God of Small Things* and a few of her non-fictional works with a focus on *Broken Republic* and *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*. Environmental concerns run parallel to, or are integrated with, other social and political implications in most of her writings. The paper identifies Roy as an environmental and literary activist who consistently stands for conservation along with her larger concerns of socio-political justice for the subaltern and she can be considered as an environmental justice activist. The paper also attempts to highlight the significance of environmentalism in literature against the backdrop of the enormous ecological threats that the planet earth faces at present.

**Keywords:** Environment, ecocriticism, marginalized communities, resistance, conservation, socio-political issues, natural resources, depletion, consumerist culture, activism, green

## 1. Introduction

Literature and environment are related, though it does not conserve the planet or its environment and ecological balance. We have the people, the government, the local and international organizations, and the media to achieve that end; yet, there have always been subtle roles that our poets and artists played in fostering a pronounced love and passion in us for our nature and its beauty. Certainly, that link did not begin with the Romantic poets of the nineteenth century or from Chaucer, the father of modern English literature; one can go much further to trace the origins in the ballads and folk songs of the early literature which abound in wonderful description of nature and its splendour.

Further, all literature, as Aristotle observes, is but imitation and there is a curious faculty in the human beings which makes us appreciate the artistic imitation, or *mimesis*, often better than the original. Probably that explains the role literature plays in evoking feelings of wonder and novelty in us when nature is treated artistically in literature as literature adds an

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aesthetic and spiritual dimension to environment when a writer like Wordsworth or Keats touch it with the magic of creative imagination. Beginning from the mid-twentieth century, literature has been playing yet one more significant role in relation to the environment – it brings out, often in an emotive and artistic manner, the depletion of nature and environment due to excessive human intervention brought about by the industrial revolution and other socio-political factors of the modern world. Moreover, the ecological issues, when taken up by renowned writers or artists, often attract the kind of media attention and significance which could result in better and faster solutions for at least some of the pressing issues; thus, writers and artists, who are fascinated by nature today, often focus their attention on the negative aspects – the environmental hazards, pollution, and threats to its beauty and sustenance. Therefore, literature attains an added significance in the contemporary world in relation to the conservation of the planet, its pure environs and beauty and bio-diversity.

Arundhati Roy, a very popular writer, activist and thinker, first appeared in public arena as a novelist with her Booker Prize winning novel *The God of Small Things*<sup>1</sup> in 1997. The novel was followed by a number of non-fictional prose works which, in general, deal with contemporary socio-political issues. Most of her writings have dealt with the problems of the marginalized communities of the country – *dalits*, *adivasis* and women. Much of what she has written is characterized by a Chomskian aversion to capitalism and neo-imperialism which she holds responsible for the social and environmental maladies of the contemporary world. This paper is an attempt to analyze her writings, both fiction and non-fiction, in an ecocritical view point, to establish the environmental concerns in her writings and brand her writings as environmentalism, against the backdrop of one of the fastest growing branches of literary criticism across the globe, namely, ecocriticism. The paper explores passages from her works to establish her unmistakable affinity to areas related to nature, environment, depletion of nature and natural resources, especially in India, and the various socio-political factors responsible for such a deplorable state.

## 2. Literary Activism

Debarati Bandhopadhyay, in her article “*Arundhati Roy: Environment and Literary Activism*” brands Arundhati Roy as a literary activist:

Activism postulates the existence, in an individual, of a high level of awareness of, and a burning desire to fight for, an issue or an

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<sup>1</sup>Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*, New Delhi: India Ink, 1997.

existence of perceived injustice. In the literary world, if an author consistently engages with contemporary issues and advocates a certain point of view, then for instance, like Arundhati Roy in India and Tim Winton in Australia, the literary figure is called a writer-activist, generally. However, it is not that such an author usually is, or is expected to be, formally, an expert in a given field of social, economic, political, cultural or environmental studies in the contemporary period. Rather, it is the high visibility and public standing that enables the literary figure to articulate the ideas inherent in a cause of activism, in a memorable way.<sup>2</sup>

Bandhopadhyay feels that activism need not be separated from writing. Roy cannot be considered as an armchair intellectual. Her vocation as a writer and her engagement as an activist who is passionately involved in Narmada Bachao Aandolan<sup>3</sup> are complementary. Her stature as a globally acclaimed writer has substantially helped in capturing international media attention to pressing socio-environmental issues of the country. Bandhopadhyay observes:

The result of the combination of Roy’s relentless distress, about issues related to environment and human rights as an activist, with her burning desire to write about them, is a distinct brand of literary activism that is intended to make all of us, as consumers of the earth, more conscious.<sup>4</sup>

We have a good number of public figures who can be labelled as activists. If Girish Karnad is a literary and cultural activist, Medha Padhkar can be called a socio-environmental activist and we often find the activists take up issues which the other political and spiritual organisations fail to take up, and fight so vigorously for them that the public has begun to take their struggles quite seriously of late. Literary activism of writers like Arundhati Roy in English and Sugatha Kumari in Malayalam, which is oriented, to a great extent, towards environmental protection, attains an additional

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<sup>2</sup>Debarati Bandhopadhyay, “Arundhati Roy: Environment and Literary Activism,” Institute of Development Studies Kolkata, April 2011, 2, <<http://www.idsk.edu.in/annual-reports/OP-24.pdf>> accessed on 13 February 2014.

<sup>3</sup>A movement to voice the concerns of thousands of *adivasis*, *dalits* and ordinary villagers who are affected by the big dams that are coming across river Narmada in the states of Maharashtra and Gujarat. The movement strives to secure justice for those people who have lost their possessions due to dams and also for those who will lose their land and livelihood when the dams will submerge their villages.

<sup>4</sup>Bandhopadhyay, “Arundhati Roy,” 29.

significance today as we see almost all the mainstream political parties and other social and spiritual institutions turn their back on conservation due to populist compulsions. Even though everybody seems to be aware of the environmental concerns of the day – the suicidal levels of deforestation, carbon emissions, global warming, acute shortage of drinking water in our cities and villages; yet, nobody seems to be very earnest in the attempts in reversing the consumerist drive or reducing emissions. Everybody agrees that rivers originating from the Western Ghats are the lifelines of the Malabar and Konkan regions along the south-western coastal line of India, a region which is identified as one of the bio-diversity hotspots of the globe. Yet, the Madhav Gadgil Committee's recommendations to conserve the Western Ghats<sup>5</sup> have been rejected by almost all larger political organizations today with such an enthusiasm that has shocked the rest of the world. Their stand in this regard can be interpreted as farmer-friendly; yet, it can only be considered as anthropocentric, short-sighted, opportunistic and suicidal in a larger, environmental perspective. Their short-sightedness is not accidental, but intentional as they are driven by narrow selfish motives of appeasement and vote-bank politics. One should not forget the fact that there are hundreds of granite quarries, mostly illegal, blowing out the hills situated along the length and breadth of the Western Ghats, and there is unbridled earth moving which flattens the hills and levels the paddy fields in the valley, there also are hundreds of illegal resorts and luxury hotels coming up in the hill stations on the Western Ghats. All these activities are irreversibly altering the ecology of the hills above and valleys below paving the way for acute water shortage, landslides and climate change. The Gadgil Committee's recommendations are primarily intended to check such large-scale land conversions and excavations. The only people who stand consistently for conservation could be a handful of environmentalists and writers. True, the social and environmental responsibility of the writers is spiralling up. M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham observe in *A Handbook of Literary Terms*:

As in earlier insurgent modes such as feminist criticism and queer theory, many ecocritical writings continue to be oriented towards heightening their readers' awareness and even towards inciting them to social and political action; but while the other movements in criticism are directed towards achieving social and political justice, a

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<sup>5</sup>The Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel, also known as Gadgil Commission after its chairman, Madhav Gadgil, was an environmental research commission appointed by the Ministry of Environment and Forests of India.

number of ecocritics are impelled by the conviction that what is at stake in the enterprise is not only the well-being but, ultimately, the survival of human race.<sup>6</sup>

### 3. *Green Thoughts of the Red Indian Tribal Chief*

About a century and a half back, in 1854, Chief Seattle, a Red Indian tribal chief, made a passionate appeal to the invading White men. The speech was made after signing a disgraceful and unilateral treaty with the White European settlers in North America.<sup>7</sup> The treaty was unilateral because he and his people were defeated in the battle. Later on, his speech became iconic in a ‘green,’ environmental perspective. It continues to gain relevance, day by day, as it is essentially prophetic in nature. In the modern sense, his speech underlines the essential difference between an anthropocentric world view and an ecocentric one. He spoke to the Whiteman:

The rivers are our brothers, they quench our thirst. The rivers carry our canoes and feed our children. If we sell you our land, you must remember, and teach your children, that the rivers are our brothers, and yours, and you must hence forth give the rivers the kindness you would give any brother.

The tribal chief had an instinctive insight into the radical difference between the outlooks of the White man and the Red man – the modern urban man and the tribal. He continued:

We know that the Whiteman does not understand our ways. One portion of land is the same to him as the next, for he is a stranger who comes in the night and takes from the land whatever he needs.

The Pacific North West tribes’ chief reveals great ‘green’ wisdom, something too rare in our political leaders of the day, when he observes:

What is man without the beasts? If all the beasts are gone, man would die from a great loneliness of spirit. For whatever happens to the beasts soon happens to man. All things are connected.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Harpham, *A Handbook of Literary Terms*, Cengage Learning: New Delhi, 2011, 82.

<sup>7</sup>Chief Seattle (1786-1866) was the leader of Dewanish and other Pacific Northwest tribes. In 1854, he reluctantly agreed to sell tribal lands to the United States Government and to move to Government established reservations. Though the authenticity of the speech can be challenged, most agree that it contains the substance and perspective of the Chief’s attitude towards nature.

<sup>8</sup><<http://www.Snopes.com>>Home>Questionable Quotes> accessed on 3 January 2014.

After two centuries, now in the twenty first century, in Central India, the tribal people who live in the Dandhakaranya forest face a similar problem. Their land is being invaded by people from outside – no, not any European settlers, but multinational corporates who would mine bauxite, coal and other precious minerals underneath their land, and like the Red Indians they too resist the invasion. Yet there is an essential difference – unlike the Red Indians, the Indian tribals have not surrendered their land before the invaders; and they have not signed any unilateral treaty so far.

#### **4. *Green Thoughts of Red Movements***

*Broken Republic*<sup>9</sup> by Arundhati Roy traces the evolution and development of the Maoist resistance in the tribal heart land of India. The book tries to track the fundamental factors responsible for an armed uprising of the dalits and adivasis of central India. In short the book is a ‘red salute’ to the comrades; but, apart from the socio-political issues, the book focuses on the environmental factors involved in the struggle. Roy seems to believe that the ongoing Naxalite movement in India, the ultra Red movement, has a ‘green’ edge to it. The struggle is fundamentally between people who live in forests, people who worship and conserve the forest and rivers, and the people who would mindlessly exploit it – use and throw nature and natural resources, a struggle between the consumerist and preservative cultures. Like the Red Indians of North America, the Indian tribals too consider nature as a deity, something inseparable from their being. Roy observes:

The low, flat-topped hills of south Orissa have been home to the Dongria Kondh long before there was a country called India or a state called Orissa. The hills watched over the Kondh. The Kondh watched over the hills and worshipped them as living deities. Now these hills have been sold for the bauxite they contain. For the Kondh it’s as though god has been sold. They ask how much god would go for if the god were Ram or Allah or Jesus Christ.<sup>10</sup>

The tribals have their ancient wisdom which tells them their life and living is inextricably associated with the hills, for their clans have been living in the hills and dales of the region for thousands of years and they are deep rooted to the land like the large, ancient trees in their forests. Roy comments:

If the flat-topped hills are destroyed, the forests that clothe them will be destroyed too. So will the rivers and streams that flow out of them and irrigate the plains below. So will the Dongria Kondh. So will the

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<sup>9</sup>Arundhati Roy, *Broken Republic*, New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2011.

<sup>10</sup>Roy, *Broken Republic*, 3.

hundreds of thousands of tribal people who live in the forest heart of India, whose homeland is similarly under attack.<sup>11</sup>

The book presents the plight of the tribals in an emotive prose – a prose that helps the reader to look at the ‘Maoist menace’ through a totally different angle; yet almost every observation of the writer is supported by facts and figures. Roy exposes the dirty nexus between the politicians and the corporates and shows how the original inhabitants of the land have been side-tracked in this rat race to rape nature mercilessly. She writes passionately in an empathetic tone, how the tribals were left with no other alternative:

If the tribals have taken up arms, they have done so because a government that has given nothing but violence and neglect now wants to snatch away the last thing they have – their land. Clearly, they do not believe the government when it says that it only wants to ‘develop’ their region. Clearly, they do not believe that the roads as wide and flat as aircraft runways are being built through their forests in Dantewada by the National Mineral Corporation are being built for them to walk their children to school. They believe that if they do not fight for their land, they will be annihilated. That is why they have taken up arms.<sup>12</sup>

She demonstrates in the book how democracy has become a toy in the hands of greedy corporates and corrupt politicians. The political leaders and the bureaucracy are in an unusual hurry in striking deals with corporate giants to ‘develop’ the area, a far too obvious greed to share the booty.

There is a MoU on every mountain, river and forest glade. We’re talking about social and environmental engineering on an unimaginable scale. And most of this is secret. It is not in the public domain. Somehow I don’t think that the plans that are afoot to destroy one of the world’s most pristine forest and ecosystems, as well as the people who live in it, will be discussed at the Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen.<sup>13</sup>

The book elaborates, in fine details, how indiscriminate mining and mega industries pollute the pristine forest land in the Tribal Belt. The environmental cost of such mega mining projects is just disastrous; yet, the government and even the mainstream media seem to be largely unconcerned to such irreversible damage to our pure environs. She narrates:

I remember my visit to the opencast iron-mines in Keonjhar, Orissa. There was forest there once. And children like these. Now the land is

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<sup>11</sup>Roy, *Broken Republic*, 4.

<sup>12</sup>Roy, *Broken Republic*, 6-7.

<sup>13</sup>Roy, *Broken Republic*, 18.

like a raw, red wound. Red dust fills your nostrils and lungs. The water is red, the air is red, the people are red, their lungs and hair are red. All day and all night trucks rumble through their villages, bumper to bumper, thousands and thousands of trucks, taking ore to Paradip port from where it will go to China. There it will turn into cars and smoke and sudden cities that spring up overnight. Into a growth rate that leaves economists breathless. Into weapons to make war.<sup>14</sup>

The book looks into the issues in Central India and tries to analyze them in a radically oriented socio-political view-point. At the same time, the observations in the book are thoroughly motivated by the writer's environmental ideology. The writer seems to believe that the environmental crisis in the region is a direct offshoot of the socio-political issues involved. She considers the mindless exploitation of natural resources by private corporates the core issue for all the problems of the region – social, political as well as ecological. Roy observes:

Now that mining license has been issued with the urgency you would associate with a knock-down distress sale, and the scams that are emerging have run into billions of dollars, now that mining companies have polluted rivers, mined away state borders, wrecked ecosystems and unleashed civil war, the consequence of what the coven has set to motion is playing out like an ancient lament over ruined landscapes and the bodies of the poor.<sup>15</sup>

The book, above everything, is a passionate call for all people to look into the ground realities in the war fields of Central India. She exhorts every environmentalist to enlist in this war to safeguard the land from the greedy capitalist forces who are engaged in mindless exploitation. The book can be interpreted also as a *green* document even though the major issue that occupies the centre-stage of the book is political. Arundhati Roy narrates her breath-taking experience of walking with the Maoist cadres through the forest trails in Dhandhakaranya, the Red Corridor, amid battalions of armed forces combing the forests to flush out the Maoists. She records her talks with the top brass of the revolutionaries, traces the history of the Naxalite movement in India, and at times passes her comments on them. Yet, she doesn't fail to observe the eco-friendly attitude of the tribal revolutionaries, she marvels at the ease with which they coexist with the forests that protect them and feed them. Roy observes that the tribal revolutionaries refuse every single attempt of the government to develop the region basically because

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<sup>14</sup>Roy, *Broken Republic*, 39.

<sup>15</sup>Roy, *Broken Republic*, 112.



they find it would interfere with their traditional mode of living. They have been living in and around the forests for centuries and they are content with that kind of life; the real problem, Roy feels, is the greed of the corporates who want to displace the tribals in large scale, excavate their sacred mountains, to dig out the minerals and ores.

The life of the tribals is Gandhian in the sense they consume the least minimum and harm nature the least. Roy spends nights together with the Comrades in their make-shift camps, deep inside the forest. She is impressed by the eco-friendly way the tribal revolutionaries live inside the forest. The poetic expressions the writer employs could kindle wonder and curiosity that may even touch admiration and empathy in a reader for the absolute proximity of the tribal revolutionaries to the pure, unpolluted nature. She doesn't hide her admiration for their pastoral life style when she remarks:

I looked around at the camp before we left. There are no signs that almost a hundred people had camped there, except for some ash where the fires had been. I cannot believe this army. As far as consumption goes, it's more Gandhian than any Gandhian, and has lighter carbon footprint than any climate change evangelist.<sup>16</sup>

Everybody seems to agree that the ongoing armed conflict in the Central Indian forests between the government forces and the Maoists should stop somehow as we read more and more about the bloody fights in the forests that are killing hundreds of fighters from both sides and often causing heavy civilian casualties. Roy feels there is but only a simple, straight forward way out – the tribals should be allowed to live in their land. Their lifestyle has been so closely associated with the hills, dales and rivers of their land. They do not have 'greed' in the Gandhian sense of the term – they just consume what is required; they do not over-consume the natural resources, the way almost everybody does in a 'developed' modern society; therefore they do not want money and the comforts that industrialization would bring in. But the real issue is that a greedy, capitalist and materialistic world outside fail to understand them. Our sensibilities have been irreversibly shaped by a consumerist culture; therefore we brand them as extremists and try to force them out of their land. Roy summarizes her understanding in a piece of 'green' wisdom when she throws a solution before the government:

The first step towards reimagining a world gone terribly wrong would be to stop the annihilation of those who have a different imagination –

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<sup>16</sup>Roy, *Broken Republic*, 60.

an imagination that is outside of Capitalism as well as Communism. An imagination which has an altogether different understanding of what constitutes happiness and fulfilment. To gain this philosophical space, it is necessary to concede some physical space for the survival of those who may look like the keepers of our past but who may really be the guides to our future. To this, we have to ask our rulers: can you leave the water in the rivers, the trees in the forest? Can you leave the bauxite in the mountain? If they say they cannot, then perhaps they should stop preaching morality to the victims of their wars.<sup>17</sup>

Toward the end of the book Roy makes a reference to ‘Antilla’, the Mumbai residence of one of the richest Indians – Mukesh Ambani. The building outshines any imperial palace and has, as Roy illustrates, twenty-seven floors, three helipads, nine lifts, hanging gardens, ball rooms, weather rooms, gymnasiums, six floors of parking, and six hundred servants – all for just three members of the Ambani family. That can be the other side of the Dandhakaranya story where hapless adivasis are forced out of their huts, and their lands without any proper compensation or rehabilitation, and a comic appendage to the life of a country where millions of Ambani’s fellow countrymen live in inhuman slums and another millions sleep on the pavements; a country where one hundred of its richest men hold assets equal to a quarter of the country’s GDP. It may not be a great puzzle for any sensible reader to read through the lines – the social and environmental cost of capitalism is huge and pathetic. The insatiable, non-sustainable, nonsensical and even criminal levels of consumerist whims can be the direct consequence of a capitalist outlook to life where the material possessions are directly equated to success and good life, an outlook that neglects the basic needs of the marginalised communities as it selfishly refuse to look into the environmental cost of capitalist development. One can assume that Roy could be advocating Eco-Socialism in the article. Wikipedia defines Eco-Socialism:

Eco-Socialism, green Socialism or Socialist Ecology is an ideology merging aspects of Marxism, socialism, green politics, ecology and alter-globalization. Eco-Socialists generally believes that the expansion of the Capitalist system is the cause of the social exclusion, poverty and environmental degradation through globalization and imperialism, under the supervision of the repressive states and traditional structures; they advocate the dismantling of capitalism and the state, focussing on

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<sup>17</sup>Roy, *Broken Republic*, 142.

collective ownership of means of production by freely associated producers and restoration of the commons.<sup>18</sup>

The relationship between the Left and ecology has been a troubled one ever since the Soviet Revolution. There has been a feeling that the over emphasis of the Communist bloc on physical growth undermined the ecological concerns of the Communist states and the thoughtless industrialisation in countries like USSR and China caused large scale damage to the ecosystems in those countries. Derek Wall observes:

Stalin suppressed Soviet environmentalism and during the Lysenko dispute, had many scientists killed or sent to labour camps, for disagreeing with the official flawed theory of natural adaptation. Although after his death the Soviet Union acknowledged the damaging effects of Stalin’s rule to some extent his brutal assault on the natural environment continued.

The ecological damage created in the Soviet Union is well known. Chernobyl, the world’s worst nuclear disaster, devastated a huge area of Ukraine and left many thousands with cancer. Industrial cotton production reduced the volume of the Aral Sea by 75 percent, turning much of the surrounding area into desert. Eastern Europe, as part of the Soviet Bloc, generated acid rain and smog from burning Dirty types of coal.<sup>19</sup>

Yet, as Derek Wall go on to point out in the book, the association of the Green and Red has to be examined in a new light in the post colonial scenario of globalization, neo imperialism and consumerism where the divide between the rich and the poor see an ugly widening of late and the consumerist drives of the rich has an adverse effect on the poor of the world, something that has a concrete example in Central Indian forests and villages where the Maoist resistance has a clear *green* edge. Richard Kerridge observes:

Another kind of environmentalism is concerned with the hurt done to people by pollution and environmental damage, and the connection between that hurt and other kinds of social injustice. This is what in America is called the Environmental Justice Movement, and its roots are in the efforts of the poor communities across the world to defend themselves against the dumping of toxic waste, the deadly contamination of their air, food and water, the loss of their

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<sup>18</sup><<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eco-socialism>> accessed on 5 January 2014.

<sup>19</sup>Derek Wall, *Rise of the Green Left: Inside the Worldwide Ecosocialist Movement*, Pluto Press: London, 2010, 78-79.

lands and livelihoods and the indifference of governments and corporates from country to country. It is the oppressed groups – the poor, women, workers on low pay, people of colour, people of indigenous pre-colonial cultures – who suffer the effects of environmental damage disproportionately. These groups are on the environmental front line and will be the most vulnerable if global warming has the consequence feared. Post-colonial environmentalists Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martinez-Alier have contrasted what they call the ‘full-stomach’ environmentalism of the North with the ‘empty-belly’ environmentalism of the South.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, it seems likely that an alliance between environmentalisms of rich and poor, however troubled it may sometimes be, represents the best chance of integrating ecological and social priorities, and of finding an environmentalism that knows what to value in traditional, preindustrial cultures and also in modernity. The emerging postcolonial ecocriticism is especially concerned with possibilities and problems of this alliance.<sup>21</sup>

Throughout her narrative Roy makes the reader compare and contrast the life style of the *adivasi* revolutionary and that of an urban capitalist. Roy implies at the stark difference in the life style of a corporate multi billionaire like Mukesh Ambani and the tribals of Central India – one is characterized by an insatiable lust for material gains and the other one, by an admirable austerity and modesty as far as physical demands and consumption are concerned. What Roy could actually accomplish in the book is that she has brought out the pure beauty of the life of an *adivasi* revolutionary – a beauty that is chaste and austere, a beauty that stems from the simplicity and fraternity that the tribal revolutionaries share among themselves and with nature – the spiritual, elemental symbiosis. One may call it Gandhian or Maoist, yet the tribal outlook to life is radically different from that of a capitalist one, something Chief Seattle underlined a century and a half back. Chief Seattle, Raechel Carson, Arundhati Roy or any other environmental evangelist has the same gospel to preach – if we are not going to bridle our wild industrial, consumerist drives, the social and ecological costs could be just unimaginable. Thus, *Broken Republic*

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<sup>20</sup>Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martinez-Alier, *Varieties of Environmentalism: Essays North and South*, London: Earthscan, 1997, 21.

<sup>21</sup>Richard Kerridge, “Cotemporary Ecocriticism between Red and Green” in John Rignall and Valentine Cunningham, *Ecology and Literature of the British Left*: London: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2012, 23.

illustrates, in a poetically passionate tone, the Red streams running down from the Green forests in Dhandhakaranya; or it can be that the book points at the Green wisdom trickling down from the Red jungles.

### **5. Green Thoughts of ‘Small Things’**

*The God of Small Things*, Roy’s debut novel, created sensation when it came out in 1997. A near Shakespearean mastery over the English language and an unmistakable compassion for the Subaltern were, among other things, the most outstanding features of the novel. Yet, a reader cannot help notice how the language of the writer acquires pure poetic dimensions when it describes nature in and around Ayemenem, the central stage of activity in the novel. Arundhati Roy has a Wordsworthian affinity to nature and its irresistible charm. The novel opens like this:

May in Ayemenem is a hot brooding month. The days are long and humid. The river shrinks and black crows gorge on bright mangoes in still, dust green trees. Red bananas ripen. Jackfruits burst, dissolute bluebottles hum vacuously in the fruity air. Then they stun themselves against clear windowpanes and die, fatly baffled in the sun.<sup>22</sup>

The picturesque description of that coastal village of Kerala invites the attention of the reader to the drama that is going to unveil in the following pages. A similar scene awaits the reader at the end, in the last chapter. Ammu and Velutha meet at the lap of nature. The novelist pictures nature as conspiring with the lovers in their bold, passionate love making, defying all rules. Roy seems to hold the notion that all institutions are anti-natural, they set forth ‘artificial’ rules to inhibit our natural, elemental drives. Look at the charm she evokes with even the tiny insects and spiders and such ‘small things’ of nature, when the lovers are left alone with only the river and the sky to watch on:

They laughed at ant-bites on each other’s bottoms. At clumsy caterpillars sliding off the ends of leaves, at overturned beetles that couldn’t right themselves. At the pair of small fish that always sought Velutha out in the river and bit him. At a particularly devout praying mantis. At the minute spider who lived in a crack in the wall of the black verandah of the history house and camouflaged himself by covering his body with bits of rubbish – a sliver of wasp wing. Part of a cobweb. Dust. Leaf rot. The empty thorax of a dead bee. Chappu Thampuran, Velutha called him. Lord Rubbish.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Roy, *God of Small Things*, 19.

<sup>23</sup>Roy, *God of Small Things*, 338-339.

River Meenachil plays a significant role in the development of the novel. One may not go so far as to draw parallels between River Mississippi in Mark Twain novels and River Meenachil in *The God of Small Things*. Yet, Roy treats the river as an organic entity with a life of its own. She traces the influence of the river on the twins, Estha and Rahel:

Here they have learned to fish. To thread coiling purple earth worms onto hooks on the fishing rods that Velutha made from slender culms of yellow bamboo.

Here they studied silence (like the children of the Fisher People), and learned the bright language of the dragonflies.

Here they learned to wait. To watch. To think thoughts and not to voice them. To move like lightning when the bendy yellow bamboo arched downwards.<sup>24</sup>

Her dreamy description of the scenic beauty of the land does not prevent Arundhati Roy from exploring into the impending ecological imbalance brought about by ‘development’:

Downriver a saltwater barrage has been built, in exchange for votes from the influential paddy farmers’ lobby. The barrage regulated the inflow of salt water from the backwaters that opened into the Arabian Sea. So now they have two harvests a year instead of one. More rice, for the price of a river.

Once it had the power to evoke fear. To change lives. But now its teeth were drawn, its spirit spent. It was just a slow slugging green ribbon lawn that ferried fetid garbage to the sea. Bright plastic bags blew across its viscous, weedy surface like subtropical flying flowers.<sup>25</sup>

She is keen on tracking the damages in environment and culture of the coastal villages brought about by Tourism Culture. The riverine eco-system was devastated by the house-boat culture in Kuttanadu, a region of low lying land along the southern coastal line of Kerala, also known as the ‘rice-bowl of Kerala’. Kuttanadu is famous for its scenic beauty, backwaters and coconut groves. The elite tourism with its resorts and luxury river cruises irreparably mutated the fine balance in the Kuttanadu’s eco-system.

Roy has created Velutha as an ideal character. He is an unmistakable link between nature and human beings. Ammu feels fascinated by the *dalit* youth basically because she shares his natural drive for freedom and dignity. In the modern sense of the term, Velutha can be rightly labelled as an ‘eco-friendly’ character in the novel. Debarati Bandhopadhyay comments:

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<sup>24</sup>Roy, *God of Small Things*, 203.

<sup>25</sup>Roy, *God of Small Things*, 124.

Viewed through the frankly evaluating eyes of young Rahel and Estha, Velutha appeared to be a special person because of his ‘green’ knowledge, or his ability to shape their world in keeping with the natural environment...

Living in and with nature, Velutha comes to represent a certain kind of power that remains unappreciated by the typically snobbish majority of Aeymenem House. Impervious as they are to the idea of Velutha’s adherence to the tradition of a way of life that is almost ritualistic in its proximity to and practice of nature-oriented work, or the heritage of an ecocentric life and broadly egalitarian values, his rise, aptitude with machines, and ability to assimilate elements of native and foreign aesthetics and culture, had appeared to threaten their own position of authority in so many ways.<sup>26</sup>

Bandhopadhyay looks into the compulsions of a novelist who has firm convictions on eco-political issues. She feels it is comparatively easier to express one’s ideology in essays, but she should be very subtle in incorporating her ideology into the structure of her fiction; otherwise the novel becomes propagandist. Roy wields her pen with absolute mastery to achieve her end with artistic subtlety. Bandhopadhyay comments:

The necessity to articulate and work consciously towards a better environment had been incorporated into the critique of environmental politics in her novel, no doubt. However, a novel that does not openly declare itself as propagandist and polemical has limited scope to communicate and publicize any particular kind of activism, environmental or otherwise. In *The God of Small Things*, therefore, I would argue, Roy had subtly and consistently introduced images that suggested a particular orientation in environmental politics, but it has been easier for her and the effect has been more conspicuous when she wrote about maladjusted nature of avowed activist essays that came in the decade following the publication of the novel.<sup>27</sup>

Arundhati Roy explores in the novel means by which harmony can be sustained between nature and human beings. Her attitude is essentially political as well as environmental. She subtly presents the entry of elements of globalization and commercialization into the tiny coastal hamlet of Aeymenem. The village which always had a history of harmonious coexistence of man and nature undergoes disastrous

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<sup>26</sup>Bandhopadhyay, “Arundhati Roy,” 14.

<sup>27</sup>Bandhopadhyay, “Arundhati Roy,” 22.

transformation in ecology and culture when modern development, tourism and modern methods of agriculture and architecture make slow inroads into Ayemenem. Upamanyu Pablo Mukharjee explores the socio-environmental implications in the novel in *Post Colonial Environments: Nature, Culture and the Contemporary Indian Novel in English*:

The location of the Ayemenem house also speaks of the continuities between old and new colonialisms. Like the History House, it is supported by lands and rubber plantations purchased during the nineteenth century which contributed to the economy of British colonialism. ... In the new world of post-independent India, it houses Chacko's pickle factory (wrested and expanded from Ammachi's more modest local enterprise) which seeks to be a small part of national effort to integrate the country into a globalised economy...

In contrast, Roy gives us a glimpse of a 'small house' that speaks of a distinct environment and a habitation that opposes the politics of 'largeness'... Velutha's hut speaks of and enables practices of integration, inclusion and equity. Next to the river and hemmed in by a huddle of trees, it nestled close to the ground, as though it was listening to a whispered subterranean secret.<sup>28</sup>

*The God of Small Things* abounds in 'green' imagery. The environmental concerns of the novelist, though subtle, are inextricably woven into the fabric of fiction. The blending is harmonious, and the 'green' concerns in the novel appear to be consistent and earnest, and probably capable of generating a green sensibility in a sensitive reader. One of the outstanding achievements of the novel is this green sensibility that pervades the novel. All the lovable characters of the novel – Ammu, Velutha, the twins and Sophy Mol exhibit a pronounced love for nature and 'natural' ways. One of the most memorable scenes in the novel can be the one where the children cross the river in an abandoned canoe to reach the hut of Velutha. Children love and admire the hut of their *dalit* worker, the sheer beauty of it with its essential, austere simplicity, even its smell. It is their love for the 'natural' and apathy for the 'artificial' that make them come closer to one another resulting in the whole conformist, materialistic world outside conspiring against them with disastrous consequences. The novel is hailed as a *dalit* novel; it also can be read as a post colonial text

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<sup>28</sup>Upamanyu Pablo Mukharjee, *Post Colonial Environments: Nature Culture and the Contemporary Indian Novel in English*, Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, 96.



that shows how colonial hangover works its subtle but decisive ways on the people of a one-time colony; further, it can read as a political novel tracing the political undertones of Kerala society in the ‘70s. But above all, the novel can be read from an ecocritical perspective and one may find that it smells *green*, the way Velutha’s hut does in the novel.

## 6. Check (the) Dams

Arundhati Roy’s passionate love for rivers and forests find a greater, more emphatic and even a militant expression in “*The Greater Common Good*,” an essay in her collection, *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*,<sup>29</sup> which reads like a road map to the Narmada River and the dams being built across her. The essay explores, in minute detail, the ground realities related to the resistance of *adivasis* and *dalits* who live in the submerging zone of the Sardar Sarover Dam<sup>30</sup> site. She narrates the untold miseries of the tens of thousands of people who were going to be evacuated from the project affected areas without any proper compensation or resettlement schemes.

Big dams are obsolete. They’re uncool. They are undemocratic. They are a Governments way of accumulating authority (deciding who will get how much water and who will grow what where). They’re a guaranteed way of taking a farmer’s wisdom away from him. They are a brazen means of taking water, land and irrigation away from the poor and gifting it to the rich.<sup>31</sup>

She believes that big dams cause irreparable damage to the ecosystem; her observations, a bit hyperbolic at times, are sharp, pointed at the grave issues that need to be urgently looked into: “They lay the earth to waste. They cause floods, water logging, salinity, they spread diseases. There is mounting evidence that links Big Dams to earthquakes.”<sup>32</sup>

Arundhati Roy demonstrates how the village folk in India, those who live in the mountains and river valleys have to pay dearly for the comforts of the rich city-dwellers. Dams essentially displace the hills-men and devastate the environment just to provide water to the industries and the privileged townspeople. Her criticism is often very pungent, eye-opening:

India lives in her villages, we’re told, in every other sanctimonious public speech. That’s bullshit. It’s just another fig leaf from the

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<sup>29</sup>Arundhati Roy, *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*, New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2002.

<sup>30</sup>A huge dam is under construction across river Narmada. The dam is expected to submerge thousands of villagers, *dalits* and *adivasis* when it is completed.

<sup>31</sup>Roy, *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*, 57.

<sup>32</sup>Roy, *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*, 58.

Government's bulging wardrobe. India doesn't live in her villages. India DIES in her villages. India gets kicked around in her villages. India lives in her cities.<sup>33</sup>

The writer details the environmental cost of big dams. She, with the accuracy of a natural scientist, proves how dams upset the fragile ecosystem of the rivers and valleys with concrete proof both from inside and outside the country:

The Stanley dam wiped out *hilsa* from the Kavery River in south India, and Pakistan's Ghulam Mohammed dam destroyed its spawning area on the Indus. *Hilsa*, like salmon, is an anadromous fish – born in fresh water, migrating to the ocean as a smelt and returning to the river to spawn. The drastic reduction in water flow, the change in the chemistry of water... will radically alter the ecology of the estuary and modify the delicate balance of fresh water and sea water which is bound to affect the spawning.<sup>34</sup>

Roy gets to the bottom and proves how large scale irrigation programmes are non-sustainable; it alters the chemistry of the land and fails the original design of big dams. The frenzy of developing countries like India and China for huge dams could be disastrous in the long run. Any rudimentary understanding of our eco-systems teaches us that any large scale intervention in nature is counter-productive, whether it is a Big Dam or a Big bomb. Roy presents the reader with lessons from our neighbourhood to prove her point:

By the mid-1980s twenty five million of the thirty seven million hectors under irrigation in Pakistan were estimated to be either salinized or waterlogged or both. In India the estimates vary between six and ten million hectors. According to 'secret' government studies, more than fifty two percent of the Sardar Sarovar command area is prone to water logging and salination.<sup>35</sup>

Roy hints at the possibility of an international lobbying behind the governments' craze for large dams. She feels the western countries are exporting their outdated technologies to Third World countries. Big dams are part of this multinational conspiracy. It drives millions of villagers, dalits and adivasis from their lands and upsets the ecological balance and

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<sup>33</sup>Roy, *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*, 70.

<sup>34</sup>Roy, *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*, 118.

<sup>35</sup>Roy, *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*, 122.

is economically non-viable in the long run. She makes her final, emphatic, statement:

Big Dams are to a nation’s ‘development’ what Nuclear Bombs are to its military arsenal. They are both weapons of mass destruction. They are both weapons governments use to control their own people. Both twentieth century emblems that mark the point in time when human intelligence has outstripped its own instinct to survival... They scramble the intelligence that connects eggs to hen, milk to cow, food to forests, water to rivers, air to life and earth to human existence.<sup>36</sup>

We have a good number of writer activists the world over who express the environmental concerns of mega dams in their works to draw the attention of the world. *Lake of Heaven*, a novel by Japanese writer Ishimure Michiko Zensu shares the concern of Roy on the impacts of megadams on the environment. A comparative analysis of both the writers in *Coming into Contact: Explorations in Ecocritical Theory and Practice* observes how the writers are mythmakers, who are compelled by their conscience to become activists:

The shared concern of Ishimure and Roy about the effects of dam construction reflects their shared concern about the effects of modernization and globalization upon nature and environment worldwide. Along with bringing our attention to the tragic results of such modern threats as industrial pollution, nuclear warfare, and globalization, they also encourage a profound and complimentary respect for preserving the traditional local folkways, stories and cultures. Both have become social activists by necessity and conscience, yet they see our primary need and hope for solving such troubles as lying in the basic cultural medicines of “storytelling” and the arts.

At heart, Ishimure and Roy are mythmakers. They insist that it is possible and essential to create new myths through modern forms of storytelling. Indeed, *Lake of Heaven* can be regarded as an extended modern work of mythopoetic storytelling.<sup>37</sup>

Arundhati Roy, beyond contention, is an avowed environmentalist among the contemporary writers. Her support for the displaced adivasis

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<sup>36</sup>Roy, *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*, 136-7.

<sup>37</sup>Annie Merrill Ingram, Ian and Sweeting Marshall, and W. Adam, eds., *Coming into Contact: Explorations in Ecocritical theory and Practice*, Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2007, 161.

and dalits is both vocal and absolute. The book implies that we need to take concrete steps to conserve our paddy fields, our wetlands, our public ponds, rivers, streams and lakes and build our traditional, community-initiated, small check-dams to ensure a stable ground water table; and we should ‘check’ our craze for mega dam projects. She voices her concern for the planet and the life in it with absolute sincerity that her observations often are bold and final:

When all the rivers, and valleys and forests and hills of the world have been priced, packaged, bar-coded and stacked in the local supermarket, when all the hay and coal and earth and wood and water has been turned to gold, what then shall we do with all gold?<sup>38</sup>

Roy’s rhetorical aversion of big dams may seem absolutely convincing and authentic for the reader for a while. Yet deliberate after thoughts in this regard could pose serious questions targeted at the finality and absolute authenticity in Roy’s tone. How could Roy live in her Delhi residence if there are no dams across Yamuna?

Great majority of Indian cities depend on major and minor dams for drinking water. Rain water harvesting may sound grand in seminars and school text books. Yet it is quite obvious that no big city can survive without a big source of water – a large dam, to cater to its domestic and commercial needs. Then Roy could be arguing for village republics, the *Gram Swaraj* of Gandhi. Well, that could ideally be a place where people chit chat leisurely on a village square. Probably nobody may read a costly Penguin copy of Arundhati Roy!

Roy’s opposition to mega dams is as much a political resistance as it is environmental; the anti-dam propaganda reflects her consistent stand against globalization and hegemony. Thus Roy vigorously joins an international group of writer activists who are anti-dam and anti-imperialist both politically and environmentally and fights the wars relentlessly using her pen and the advantage of her international visibility as a celebrity. Rob Nixon observes:

Roy was not a founding member of an environmental justice movement but a late affiliate. This complicated the fraught politics of representation and left her more vulnerable to attack on grounds of privilege, insensitivity and usurpation. However, she persisted in using her celebrity visibility to try to amplify the cause of Narmada River’s resource rebels. Moreover, she became a vital translator in

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<sup>38</sup>Roy, *Algebra of Infinite Justice*, 151.

four ways. First, she translated an impenetrably technocratic discourse into more accessible language and storylines. Second, she gave an Indian story an international audience of an order it would not otherwise have achieved. Third, alongside the NBA, Medha Patkar and Vandana Shiva she articulated the battle over Narmada River mega-dams to the international water wars, making the Narmada campaign an iconic struggle. Fourth, Roy placed destructive hydrological regimes in the broader transnational contexts of neo-liberalism’s ascendant hegemony and the international opposition to that ascent. Through this last act of translation, Roy became, alongside Naomi Klein, the primary invigorating voice for a whole new generation of antiglobalization activists.<sup>39</sup>

Thus Roy’s charges against big dams, in fact, are pronouncements against the very foundations of modern urban societies. The ideas expressed in the book, though idealistic and even fantastic, are still honestly and emphatically relevant today. The book is a mirror held against the reader; it makes him retrospect and challenges his conscience. She makes us see ourselves in the real light that reveals our ugly underbellies. It could only be reasonable to think that the collection of essays could leave a reader sadder but wiser.

## 7. Conclusion

Much of Arundhati Roy’s writings can be labelled as Environmentalism. The primary concerns in her writings include social and political; yet, her passionate love and concern for nature and environment forms an undercurrent of her fictional and non-fictional works. R. Kerridge writes:

Environmentalism began to take shape in the second half of the twentieth century, in response to perceptions of how dangerous environmental damage had become. This movement grew partly out of traditions of enthusiasm for wild nature, but is distinct from those traditions. The threats that preoccupy environmentalists are not only to wilderness but also to human health, food and shelter, and they are global as well as local.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2011, 171.

<sup>40</sup>Richard Kerridge, “Environmentalism and Ecocriticism” in Patricia Waugh, ed., *An Oxford Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006, 352.

*Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson heralded the era of Environmentalism in the West.<sup>41</sup> The book exposed the toxic effects of residues of industrial and agricultural chemicals in animal and human bodies. Further the book prophesied the impending ecological disasters before a world blindly engaged in its industrial, capitalist and consumerist drives.

Feminist environmental justice campaigners, such as Vandana Shiva, point out also that women and children are disproportionately vulnerable to environmental hazards. Roy too probably agrees to this theory and demonstrates how the marginalized people of the country – tribals, dalits and villagers, are constantly being displaced by mega industrial, mining and dam projects.

Roy believes that there is no essential difference between what she expresses in her fiction and nonfiction. She believes in the fictional reality and relevance of her novel. Thus, the grave question she poses in her nonfiction regarding environment perfectly resonates with her subtle presentation of ecological issues in her novel. She expressed her views explicitly in an interview:

I don't see a great difference between *The God of Small Things* and my works of nonfiction. As I keep saying, fiction is truth. I think fiction is the truest thing there ever was. My whole effort now is to remove that distinction. The writer is the midwife of understanding. It is very important for me to tell politics like a story, to make it real, to draw a link between man with his child and what fruit he had in the village he lived in before he was kicked out, and how that relates to Mr. Wolfensohn at the world bank. That is what I want to do. *The God of Small things* is a book where you connect the very smallest thing to the very biggest: Whether it is the dent that a baby spider makes on the surface of water or the quality of the moonlight on a river or how history and politics intrude into your life, your house, your bedroom.<sup>42</sup>

Arundhati Roy as an activist and political thinker firmly believes that capitalism is enemy *numero uno* of the humankind. It is rooted on greed and exploitation. Unbridled capitalism results in mindless exploitation of fellow human beings and suicidal levels of depletion to nature and natural recourses. Yet, she doesn't seem to possess a credible alternative to parliamentary democracy, which almost always has a tendency to slip

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<sup>41</sup>Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, New York: Houghton Muffin, 1962.

<sup>42</sup>David Barsamian, "Interview with Arundhati Roy," *Progressive*, April 2001, < [http// www.progressive.org](http://www.progressive.org)> accessed on 22 January 2014.

down into inhuman capitalism. She seems to romance with the Maoist village republics in many of her works. Yet, she also admits that free thinkers like her would probably be rounded up and black listed, and even silenced, once the Maoist rebels fighting in the forests win the battle, come to power and establish a Communist State.

One of the fundamental difficulties that environmentalism faces is that it often seems to be a ‘walking-backward-syndrome’ that Baby Kochamma in *The God of Small Things* suffers from. It visibly opposes development and pleasures that machines and modern life style bring home. Richard Kerridge observes:

Another difficulty is that environmentalism seems to be all about things we should stop doing ... environmentalists have to warn against popular objects of desire – cars especially that symbolize success and good life. Environmentalism can thus seem hostile to pleasure: a movement of the wealthy middle classes, resistant to the economic growth that would bring middle class living standards to poorer people.<sup>43</sup>

One can observe certain incongruities in the life and ideals of Ms. Roy, something that is too trivial to mention, yet unavoidable as a person’s life cannot be viewed completely divorced from her eco-political ideology. In spite of her consistent stand against multi-national corporates, Roy always chooses to get her works published by corporate publishing houses like Penguin Books. She dreams of village republics; yet is comfortable living in cosmopolitan Delhi and writes about adivasis and dalits in English, a language most of the marginalized communities fail to grasp.

Yet, in her interviews she observes that in a poly lingual country like India, no language can be considered as common language and any regional language naturally is a barrier for millions of others who do not follow that language. She adds that she is getting many of her works translated into Indian languages for the sake of ordinary readers. She also reminds us of the days she spent as a child in a Kerala village to prove that she cannot be termed as a ‘city-basher.’

Whatever the arguments against the absolute authenticity of her stands in socio-environmental issues can be, I sincerely feel that her voice is distinct among the contemporary writers in the country. She has been successful, to a great extent, in taking the fights of the marginalized communities for survival, to the international centre-stage. Moreover, she has sounded warning bells, loud and clear, against the impending

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<sup>43</sup>Kerridge, “Environmentalism and Ecocriticism,” 534.

environmental disaster. Let us not forget that she is fundamentally a writer, the best we can expect from her is to highlight the environmental issues and voice her concern for this ailing planet through her writings as evocatively as possible. A gifted writer like her can definitely draw the society, through her poetic, emotive and forceful language into the collective attention that environmental issues badly deserve today. Further, it is for the environmentalists, policy makers, spiritual organizations and other proactive people to work steady towards concrete measures to safeguard the pure environs of the planet.

Roy has a Gandhian affinity to ‘small things’ – the rural and small scale contrasted to urban and large scale, the hand-made contrasted to bulk produced by machines. Roy seems to identify the true enemy to real democracy and ecocentric politics in big entities: Big Dams, Big Bombs, Big Cities, Big Industries, Big Nations – anything big ultimately accumulates power and begin to devour the smaller, less significant identities. She hopes for a small god for small things, something which forms the core theme of her Booker winning novel, *The God of Small Things*. She feels that our ecosystems too are sensitive and fragile like the marginalized communities; they need their small gods to safeguard them. She states her ideology explicitly yet poetically, in *An Ordinary Person’s Guide to Empire*, in a tone that could make any sensitive reader empathize with her cause, even to enlist and stand abreast with the mercilessly abused and exploited – our marginalised communities and an environment seriously under threat:

The time has come, as Alrus said. Perhaps things will get worse and then better. Perhaps there is a small god in heaven readying herself for us. Another world is not only possible; she is already on her way. May be many of us won’t be here to greet her, but on a quiet day, if you listen very carefully, you can hear her breathing.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup>Arundhati Roy, *An Ordinary Person’s Guide to Empire*, New Delhi: Viking, 2005, 44.