

**ECO-CRITICAL INVESTIGATION OF ARUNDHATI ROY AND  
EDWARD ABBEY**

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**Abstract**

*The present age is an age of material progress and technological advancement. In this age humanity has taken nature for granted with an anthropocentric outlook, means men is superior to nature and free to exploit it for the fulfillment of their technocratic dreams. But there are some writers in English literature like Arundhati Roy and Edward Abbey who tries to delineate that nature is the necessity for humanity not a commodity. Through their writings they have proved that the importance of environment for living beings cannot be ignored anymore. Amitabh Roy in his critical book *The God Of Small Things: A Novel of Social Commitment* rightly describes 'Socially aware intellectuals cannot disregard the environment in the modern world. Arundhati Roy is deeply concerned about it.'*<sup>1</sup>

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# ECO-CRITICAL INVESTIGATION OF ARUNDHATI ROY AND EDWARD ABBEY

-AARTI SAHU

Arundhati Roy, one of the most thought provoking woman writers of Indian soil, delineates a firm desire for preserving nature and environment. Her predominant passion is to cease environmental affliction caused by humanity, knowingly or unknowingly. In her novel *The God of Small Things* she exposes inhuman practices done in the name of modern development, tourism, economic growth, urbanization to devastate our Mother Earth. The exotic beauty of Kerala which has created an everlasting impression of joy upon her mind has made her seek an affinity with the natural elegance of the region and that is why she cannot bear its destruction in the name of modernization and industrialization. By writing such novels she wants to invoke her readers against the threats posed to our existence by environmental pollution for which we ourselves are responsible to a great extent. Not only her writings but her personal life is also dedicated to the cause of nature and its protection. *The God of Small Things* ecocritically highlights how she talks about the slow and silent destruction of the pristine beauty and divine purity of the 'God's Own Country' which ultimately rings the bell of warning against our unconscious attempts at self destruction which comes very subtly with the destruction of nature and disturbance of ecological balance. Whereas Edward Abbey, a deep ecologist, anarchist, desert lover, iconoclast and an action provoking man from American soil, who authored many fictional and non fictional discourses on environmentalism and novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, who gave birth to Earth First!, an environmental organization in America to preserve Natural and natural environment of the land. The natural beauty of Utah desert near Arizona had created abiding impression upon his mind. He not only provokes the readers to take actions against environmental issues but tells the ways to do ecosabotage (deliberate destruction) in order to save the land of his great love; Utah desert. His novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang* has been continuously cited by nature lovers as an inspiration for radical environmentalism. He gave birth the

term called 'Monkey wrenching' in his novel, which means to disturb the developmental and construction works of government by causing physical harm to these works and machineries at the site. He provokes his readers to spoil these machines by deploying caltrops at roads, cutting hydraulic pipelines, spilling Karo syrup, sugar syrup and sand in the fuel tanks. The ecocritical study of *The Monkey Wrench Gang* and Edward Abbey tells how and why individual has to fight against the environmental crisis, and one way to achieve freedom from pollution can be ecosabotage.

The plot of *The God of Small Things*, set in the Southern Indian State of Kerala, is divided, chronologically, between the late 1960s and early 1990s. It revolves around a love relationship of Syrian Christian divorcee, Ammu, with a low caste 'untouchable' carpenter, Velutha and her twin children Estha and Rahel at the surface level but there is an inward story of environmental degradation, which goes very silently along the main story of the novel. Apart from this the novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang* starts clearly with the story of four nature lovers who seem interested in destructing everything which can spoil the natural beauty of the Utah Desert. Their motives are clear as Dr. Sarvis with his assistant Ms. Bonnie goes for a long drive in order to burn billboard which are the symbol of artificial development. Hayduke the real hero of the novel along with Seldom Seen Smith, a river rafter, tries to demolish the Glen Canyon Dam over the river Colorado. Abbey overtly seems critical of the urban development in the novel. He makes his characters to demolish rail tracks, roads, dams and machines of the state government. The novel reflects his sole purpose is to save the natural biodiversity by doing violence which is being destroyed in the name of growth. His encouragements for deep ecology and ecosabotage have a motive behind, to keep safe Colorado River and Utah desert from devastation. He promotes violence only against modern machines which symbolizes urban development, not against men. His likings for River Colorado is expressed through many phrases as 'little Colorado river'<sup>2</sup>, 'golden river flowing to the sea'<sup>3</sup>, 'how green and cool and clear it was? God, it's enough to make a man sick.'<sup>4</sup>, 'cold green river'<sup>5</sup> and 'darkened river'<sup>6</sup>. He personifies it as lovely Goddesses of serene beauty He further expressed his love for Colorado River with the help of Seldom Seen Smith in the novel '[He]

as usual was fondling memories. He remembered the real Colorado, before damnation, when the river flowed unchained and unchanneled in the joyous floods of May and June.' ( TMWG 58)It is the inestimable impact of the industrial revolution over the River Colorado which made Edward Abbey to write *The Monkey Wrench Gang* in order to provoke readers to take actions against this destruction of the nature.

In similar manner the novel *The God of Small Things* depicts post pastoral India which has been drastically and adversely changed by social, economical and cultural developments in the town. The changing landscape of the village for the worse and water pollution of the Meenachil River becomes emblem of the environment degradation of the world at large. At the very outset Roy talks about Kerala and its natural beauty and then about river Meenachil. She implicitly and stylishly expresses her concern for natural degradation, but Abbey explicitly has expressed his hatred for modern machines and urban development in his novel. Abbey explicitly brings forward the adverse effect of the pollution over the river as 'You know and I know what it was like here, before them bastards from Washington moved in and ruined it all. You remember the river, how fat and golden it was in June, when the big runoff come down from the Rockies? Remember the deer on the sandbars and the blue herons in the willows and the catfish so big and tasty and how they'd bite on spoiled salami?'<sup>8</sup> Roy implicitly deals with some local environmental issues in order to illustrate what exactly is happening at the global level with nature, e.g., faulty drainage system and factory's discharge of pesticides in the rivers, mass killing of the aquatic life, colossal construction of skyscrapers in place of small village chalets which have detrimental effect on the natural pulchritude of that region. As she writes in the novel 'The countryside turns an immodest green. Boundaries blur as tapioca fences take root and bloom. Brick walls turns mossgreen. Pepper vines snake up electric poles. Wild creepers burst through laterite banks and spill across the flooded roads. Boats ply in the bazaars. And small fish appear in the puddles that fill the PWD potholes on the highways.' Abbey also opens his novel with such changes and clearly makes complains for state government for the behemoth construction of dams, bridges, oil companies and mining companies which have spoilt the local ambience and

devastated the natural beauty of that region. 'His only complaint was the U.S. Government. The Utah State Highway Department and a consortium of oil companies, mining companies and public utilities were trying to destroy his livelihood, put him out of business and obstruct the view.'<sup>10</sup> Roy beautifully tells the readers about the filthy condition of the Meenachil River in the novel because of pollution, which is the story of all Indian rivers known for their holiness and purity: 'It was warm, the water, grey green. Like rippled silk. With fish in it. With the sky and trees in it. And at night, the broken yellow moon in it.'<sup>11</sup> When Rahel returned from USA after twenty three years she finds the river bereft of life. It appears to her as a big city drain; and completely inanimate. There are no fishes, not any other sign of life in it: ' (the river) Greeted her with a ghostly skull's smile, with holes where teeth had been and a limp hand raised from a hospital bed.....'.<sup>12</sup> During the heavy rain in the month of June the river becomes no more than a swollen dangerous drain. A thin ribbon of thick mud always floats on the surface of the river. There are no more fish in the river. Only occasionally silver fish can be seen, and they too become the causation of blockage of culverts: 'Most of the fish had died. The ones that survived suffered from fin rot and had broken out in boils'.<sup>13</sup> The River is choked with thick weeds. Bronze winged lily trotters do fun and frolic across its banks; animals wallow over the muddy surface of it. Such spectacles are unbearable for Roy because she had seen it as a holy river, as a symbol of youth, vigor, and life for Ayemenem, and now it looks completely perished. Amar Nath in his book *Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things: A Critical Appraisal* rightly observes 'Roy presents the river besides the Ayemenem house as a swollen drain in which a thin ribbon of thick water lapped wearily at the mud banks'.<sup>14</sup> whereas in a similar manner Abbey has also pointed that it is the water value of the river Colorado that has turned it into a 'dam controlled river' and this all has been done at the cost of ecological beauty of that river as well as that place. Edward Abbey has shown that once the dam has been built by the state government over the river to control its water to send it to the major metropolitan cities of the America, they have neglected the biodiversity of that region during the whole process. They have made a behemoth structure of concrete but what about the aquatic life of the river and other animals which all

used to stay at its banks for water and shelter? The whole biodiversity of that region has been withered which was the part of the extreme beauty of the Colorado River. Abbey has expressed his anger in the following lines of the novel 'They stride across the horizon in multicolumn grandeur, looped together by the swoop and gleam of high-voltage cables charged with energy from Glen Canyon Dam, from the Navajo Power Plant, from the Four Corner and Shiprock plants, bounds south and westward to the burgeoning Southwest and California. The blazing cities feed on the defenseless interior'<sup>15</sup> The construction of the Glen Canyon Dam over the River Colorado is opposed by Abbey as nothing but the display of the power of state government of America with a strong support of modern technological development. They show that as Dam can control the river and its water, same way state government can easily govern their life. He shows his readers the methods of violent opposition by which the maturation and multiplication of urbanization can be stopped.

Roy implicitly stresses that Litter, Shit and pesticides are the critical sources of water pollution in the river Meenachil once deemed so holy by the locals. Above all, harmful toxic waste is being released in the form of factories waste. 'the river that smelled of shit, and pesticides bought with world bank loans'.<sup>16</sup> Along with the unadulterated factory effluents, slum dwellers are also laundering over the banks of the river. The river has been exploited till its death by aborigines. Roy has thrown a good deal of light on politics being exercised on the water of the river as has been overtly expressed by Abbey in his novel she writes: 'down river, a salt water barrage has been built, in exchange for votes from the influential paddy farmers lobby. The barrage regulated the inflow of salt water from back waters that opened into the Arabian Sea. So now they had two harvests a year instead of one. More rice for the price of river'.<sup>17</sup> These lines clearly depict that aborigines are expecting more and more from the river than it can give to them. They believe in earning money at the cost of nature.

The rise of middle class and middle class individualism also gets its share of attention in both the novels in context of environmental degeneration. The adverse effect of the commercial and industrial segment of society over the

natural beauty is very much evident in almost each chapter of the novels. At this point both Roy and Abbey draw our attention to the fact that how people are craving for urbanization instead of longing for profitable agricultural life. It is very much apparent in *The God of Small Things* that Ayemenem village has been redundant for a nearby city 'Cochin' and people of Arizona are more interested in earning money by mining at desert without caring about the adverse effect of it in *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. Roy and Abbey by focusing on these specific aspects are expressing that this spurious city life is gobbling our smaller, natural and beautiful countryside life. Roy uses the phrase, "The unadulterated factory effluents" many a times in the novel, to express her apprehensions for nature's pollution especially that of River's Meenachil. The novelist comes down heavily on the factors behind polluting the river such as different state governmental policies, heavy investment on pesticides (with the help of World Bank money) to harvest more and more crop and establishing more and more factories, K. V. Surendran in his book *The God of Small Things: A Saga of Lost Dreams* makes a pertinent comment: 'The government departments come under attack and the contemporary society with all its pitfalls is unfolded before us in the novel'.<sup>18</sup>

Abbey in *The Monkey Wrench Gang* discuss overtly the issue of urban money which comes from Texas, New York and other major cities of America and the same money is being spent in order to change desert in to a recreational park for public which appears as a major threat to the natural bio diversity of that region. According to Abbey these big cities of America are investing their money in order to establish oil companies and mines to loot desert's hidden treasure which will spoil its natural beauty. According to Abbey these all are against the laws of nature. The depiction of the impact of the gulf money on the population of Kerala is also one of the dominating features in *The God of Small Things*. The people working in Gulf Countries are investing their hard earned money on modern luxuries like different sorts of vehicles which are leading source of air pollution. To Roy and Abbey people should enjoy luxurious life, but not at the cost of nature and environment. In the opening chapter of novel we find that Estha is passing by "the new, fresh baked, iced, gulf money houses, built by nurses, masons, wire benders and bank clerks who worked

hard and unhappily in faraway places”<sup>19</sup> and feels miserable because the money flowed from the gulf countries have totally changed the local biodiversity of the Kerala region. There is a reference to Baby Kochamma abandoning her ornamental garden. The reason for dumping it is her new love; that is ‘Dish Antenna’. The rejuvenation and serenity that we get in the lap of nature can never be replaced by the entertainment that we get sitting in front of a T.V and other modern recreational electronic machines. Amar Nath says that ‘The author, through this symbol of T.V. society witnessed a fundamental change’.<sup>20</sup>

Abbey also stresses on the decayed condition of the desert because of the industrialization as he describes in the novel that whole desert has been covered by pipe lines some for mines and some for power supply. Such specific features of the destruction of the natural beauty given by Abbey and Roy, shows their intense adulation for nature and natural beauty. They offer details for the systematic and inhuman neglect and final ruination of nature. After reading *The God of Small Things* and *The Monkey Wrench Gang* from an ecocritical point of view one can safely conclude that Roy and Abbey considers nature a necessity of human life which has been neglected for a long time. They have observed nature so scrupulously that their descriptions are very tangible. Such sort of peculiarities of the Utah desert, hard survival of Junipers, artificial water reservoir, monsoon season, the month of April, and local poor drainage system gives an ecocritical tone to the novels. Such tone of the novels also makes a critical comment on the state and central government and their recklessness towards natural environment and its protection. It also points to the perennial problem of flood and cyclone. Roy’s association with environmental movement like Narmada Bachao Andolan, Nuclear Power Project in India, is clearly can be felt in almost each and every chapter of the novel. Their commitment to the cause of preserving the environment and ecology can be seen clearly in their being a genuine environmentalist in their personal lives. Thus their persona make an ecocritical study of the novels all the more effective and fruitful. Roy deals with these problems in an Indian style that is given by Gandhiji called non violence but Abbey deals with these problems in a violent manner as he feels that no more silent protest will help nature. He feels that actions are



louder than words but violence in any form can't be tolerated whether it is done for a good cause. Their approach for environmentalism is different as Arundhati Roy implicitly invokes reader's attention to control the deteriorating condition of the Nature through her writings. On the other hand Edward Abbey provokes the reader to take direct actions to protect nature. Roy makes humanity aware about nature's exploitation by present day society which is dominated by industrialization and urbanization. She uses her writings as a powerful weapon to fight for vital issues like global warming and systematic destruction of nature. She draws a parallel between the exploitation of nature and that of women by men in patriarchal society. She warns humanity for the misuse of pesticides and radioactive substances. Whereas Abbey's novels ignite readers to do the act of 'monkey-wrenching' which advocated the direct defense of the Mother Earth by doing Deep ecology, ecosabotage and civil disobedience. He not only provokes but paves the way for ecosabotage. His novels are the Bible for the radical environmentalism through which he justifies the morality of ecosabotage for Nature. But it is not violence which can prevent pollution but great amount of awareness can do this which is being done smartly by Roy through her environmental conscious writings. So modern day environmental crisis, can be smartly controlled by becoming aware about such problems associated with it, not by vandalizing public property in the name of environmentalism.

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