

ENVIRONMENTAL APOCALYPSE IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S *THE END OF IMAGINATION*

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Abstract

*We are facing a global ecological crisis today. Current ecological problems are the by-product of our culture. In fact, nature and culture are the two sides of a coin, affect each other and are affected by each other. Ecological harmony sustains till man acknowledges himself as a part of the organic whole and admits the wholeness, integrity and interrelatedness of the natural world but if he tempts to impose on it, nature too reacts violently. Definitely, it will be our myopic vision and narrow mentality if literature is taught and studied without having concern for nature's present position and the ecological laws that govern all life forms. We have one planet to live in and violence to its fauna and flora, to its physical and biological world is a matter of concern in environmental writings. In the present study, an attempt is made to explore how Roy in her Dystopian work, *The End of Imagination* warns people against nuclear weapons and atomic explosion. The paper discusses how Roy employs apocalyptic rhetoric as a strategy to provide an emotional bit of catastrophe through a series of natural imagery. Further, the paper emphasises that the aim of apocalypse is not just to deepen the sense of anxiety but to inject a sense of regard and responsibility in people towards our globe.*

Keywords: *Apocalypse, Dystopian work, Ecocriticism, Ecological crisis, Globe, Planet.*

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Anthropocentrism is creating chaos, anarchy, and disorder in the ecosphere and defacing the earth beyond recognition. Our ego-conscious is undermining the eco-consciousness and leading environmental maladies like global warming, green house gas effect, hurricanes, flood, earthquake, land slide, acid rain, water and land toxicity etc. At such a crucial time when the security and integrity of the planet are at stake, literature can not play the role of a passive observer and remained unaffected by eco calamities. In the past few decades a new literary approach, ecocriticism regarding environmental writings has come into existence. In 1978, William Rueckert coined the term ecocriticism in his corner stone essay, *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*. Ecocriticism is an umbrella term and no single definition can be given to define it. The substitute terms for ecocriticism are green criticism, eco poetics, green cultural studies etc. According to Rueckert, "Ecocriticism is the application of ecology and ecological concepts to study of literature" (107). Scott Slovic offers a broad definition of the discipline of ecocriticism:

Ecocriticism is the study of explicitly environmental texts (including literature, film, music, visual art, and popular media) from any critical perspective or the application of various environmental lenses (ranging from scientific ecology to the language and

the terminology of environmental justice scholarship) to any kind of “texts,” even material that presents no obvious statement about the more-than-human world or the relationship between the human and non human. (29)

Camilo Gomides defines ecocriticism as “The field of inquiry that analysis and promotes the work of art that “raises moral questions about human interaction with nature, while also motivating audiences’ to live within a limit that will be binding over generations” (16).

Apocalypse is a distinguished feature of ecocritical and environmental discourses. The etymological root of apocalypse is the Greek apokalypsis, meaning unveiling or uncovering. Anti-Utopian literature or Dystopian literature is the literature of ecological apocalypse. Garrard locates the origin of apocalypticism in Zoroastrianism. He states, “Notions of the world’s gradual decline were widespread in ancient civilizations, but Zoroaster bequeathed to Jewish, Christiana and later secular model of history a sense of urgency about the end of the world” (85). However the environmental apocalypse is not always about predicting the end of the world, but about striving to stop it by persuasive means. In general, in popular culture, we have come to know many apocalypses with catastrophe, but in the Christian tradition, the apocalypse is both an end and a new beginning. According to Buell “Apocalypse is the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has its disposal” (285). Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962), Paul Ehrlich’s *The Population Bomb* (1972) and Al Gore’s *Earth in Danger* (1992) are some of the most influential books in Environmental Apocalypticism. Postmodern apocalyptic narratives are the grimmer tales of the end of the world and devoid of optimism. The traditional story of apocalypse ends with the hope of a better world.

Arundhati Roy is a front line eco-warrior. She does not adhere to lip service but she herself had been a part of many environmental movements. She frequently drew the attention of the public towards environmental issues of the world. She wrote *The End of Imagination* (1998) to record her disapproval against the Indian government's project of Pokhran Nuclear Tests II. The Pokhran II tests were a series of five nuclear bomb test explosions conducted by India at the Indian Army's Pokhran Test Range in Rajasthan in May 1998. The aim of this nuclear explosion was to test India's potentiality to make fission and thermonuclear weapons. The series of Pokhran Nuclear Tests II was held from 11 May 1998 to 13 May 1998. It was given the code name **Operation Shakti**. One fusion and four fission bombs were tested. It was an underground test in order to check nuclear fallout from entering into the atmosphere. The first nuclear test, Pokhran test I was conducted by India in May 1974 and was given the code name **Smiling Buddha**.

The End of Imagination is an apocalyptic work of Arundhati Roy. In this work, she flatly rejects the necessity of conducting such nuclear tests and refuses the notion of nuclear war. Pointing to the eco calamities, Roy forewarns, "If there is a nuclear war, our foes will not be China or America or even each other. Our foe will be the earth itself. The very elements – the sky, the air, the land, the wind and water will all turn against us. Their wrath will be terrible"(12). Dropping of atomic bomb destroys not only the targeted area but its radioactive rays diffuse almost one continent to another. Roy is of the opinion that targeting Pakistan is not the solution of India's problems. Roy predicts, "Though we are separate countries, we share skies, we share winds, we share water. Lahore and Amritsar are thirty miles apart. If we bomb Lahore, Punjab will burn. If we bomb Karachi then Gujrat and Rajasthan, perhaps even Bombay, will burn. Any nuclear war with Pakistan will be a war

against ourselves”(34). The title of Roy’s work per se shows that the destruction and devastation will be beyond imagination if there is nuclear explosion. Roy paints a horrible picture of death and destruction with the use of apocalyptic rhetoric and states, "What shall we do then, those of us who are still alive? Burned and blind and bald and ill, carrying the cancerous carcasses of our children in our arms. Where shall we go? What shall we eat? What shall we drink? What shall we breathe?"(12-13).

Roy expresses her concern over man’s isolation from nature. Man has been swiped away from the world of nature in the flood of modern technology. He has become passive, inert and indifferent towards his surroundings. He has no time to look at the beauties of nature and to feel its blessings. He considers nature as a mechanical part of life and has no sensitivity towards nature’s phenomenal miracles. He assumes himself as the owner of the earth. He has no physical, emotional and spiritual bonding with nature. Result ethical sense towards nature remains no more and the sense of love, regards and responsibility to it has been also dissolved. Roy attacks at the anthropocentrism of human beings and warns about the wrath of nature. She accentuates the fact that in harming nature, man is harming himself. She asserts that man belongs to the earth, not the earth belongs to man. She alerts that all things are connected on the earth. Man does not weave the web of life. He is mere a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself. In a prophetic tone, she says that the creator of atomic bombs may become the victim of it. We have to learn lessons from historical tragedies owing to nuclear explosion. Nobody can forget on 6 August 1945 during World War II, an American B-29 bomber dropped an atomic bomb over Hiroshima and 80000 people were killed immediately killed. On 9 August 1945 the second

nuclear bomb was dropped on Nagasaki. Nuclear explosions have far-reaching impacts. The descendants of the atomic explosion stricken ancestors are still suffering in many ways.

Roy sounds the alarm that nuclear weapons are the greatest threat to the environment even millions of time greater than global warming and green house gases. Roy predicts that the following will be the aftermaths of nuclear explosion.

- ✓ The land, air and water will turn toxic.
- ✓ Nuclear fallout will cause nuclear or rapid cooling and the earth will be engulfed in intense darkness.
- ✓ Millions of people will die and the surviving ones will be suffered from lethal diseases.
- ✓ An unprecedented change will occur in the climate.
- ✓ Ozone layer will diminish in its area.
- ✓ Our fields and forests will burn for days.
- ✓ The genetic mutation will occur in plants and animals.

The End of Imagination is an eye-opener work of in which Roy deftly employs apocalyptic rhetoric to portray the looming danger. She paints the pathetic picture of atomic explosion stricken world. According to Frank Kermode, “Apocalypse is a pattern of anxiety that we shall find recurring, with interesting differences, in different stages of modernism. Its recurrence is a feature of our cultural tradition, if not ultimately of our physiology” (96). Roy condemns India’s nuclear policy. In her opinion, in the poverty stricken country like India, the first choice of the government is to provide food, cloth and shelter to the public rather than wasting a huge amount of money in such mass killer devices. In Roy’s view, the immediacy of the government is to provide pollution free atmosphere to people. The preference of the government should be to solve social, economical and health problems of

people rather than making an atom bomb. Elizabeth Rosen explains, “Apocalypse is an organizing structure that can create moral and physical order while also holding the possibility of social criticism that might lead to a reorientation in the midst of a bewildering historical moment” (xiii). As Roy appeals:

All I can say to every men, women and sentient child here in India and over there, just a little away in Pakistan, is: Take it personally. The devastation will be indiscriminate. The bomb is not in your backyard. It is in your body. And mine. Nobody, no nation, no government, no men, no god, has right to put it there. We are radioactive already, and the war has not even begun. So, stand up and say something. Never mind if it's been and said before. Speak up on your own behalf. Take it very personally. (20-21)

Environmental literature provides a better understanding of nature. It changes our mentality and perspective towards nature and motivates to put theories and beliefs into action. It imparts a needed corrective to our anthropocentric mind set and warns us not to create turmoil in the world of nature to satisfy our ego or to fulfil our interest. Arundhati Roy is a staunch lover of humanity. She wants to transmit the message love, non-violence and fraternity through her environmental apocalyptic writing. Her aim of apocalyptic writing was not just make prophecy or prediction but to explore the ecological problems and suggesting their solutions. She writes with the purpose of polarizing people and makes them alert about violence to nature and suggests ways out of the crisis. Thus, the detailed apocalyptic rhetorical analysis displays how *The End of Imagination* is constructed in order to achieve certain political results.

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