

## ENVIRONMENT AS A RECURRING THEME IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S NOVELS *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS* AND *THE MINISTRY OF UTMOST HAPPINESS*

**Deepti Srinivas**

Research Scholar

Department Of English, Mangalore University  
Mangalagangothri, Karnataka, India

### Abstract

*Women and environment share a close bond. They care and nurture each other. Both have the inherent capacity to flourish in a conducive atmosphere. Literature which mirrors life has a huge say in producing content which discusses topics related to environment. More so, women writers actively participate in writing about environment, as they understand the issues of dominance and destructive violence in a better manner. Arundhati Roy is a noted writer in women's writing of contemporary India. She is also a political activist involved in human right causes and a staunch environmentalist. In both her novels, *The God of Small Things (TGST)* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness (TMUH)*, Roy demonstrates a penchant to discuss issues related to the environment and the destruction caused to it through human greed. Seasons, rivers, dams, polluted environment in cities, factories that destroy natural resources are common themes. Both imaginary and real places in her novels are characterized by the vivid imagery of nature and the surrounding environment, thus making it a recurring theme in her fictional works providing a non-fictional angle to story-telling.*

**Keywords:** *Environment; rivers; dam; seasons; birds and animals; effluence; destruction; human greed.*

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*Our biggest moral debit is to the environment. Take-take-take, nothing given back.*

- Margaret Atwood

This is a quote from the Booker Prize winner, famous Canadian poet, novelist, literary critic, essayist, teacher, environmental activist and inventor, Margaret Atwood. Women and environment have a close bond with each other. Both have the inherent capacity to flourish in a conducive atmosphere. The best part of this mutual association is that the entire world benefits out of it. Literature which mirrors life has a huge say in producing content which discusses topics related to environment. In her article "Literature and the Environment: Fictions of Nature, Culture, and Landscapes", Teresa Shewry questions:

Does literature simply repeat back to us truths that are already known to science, political movements, or politicians? If literature does act as a prism for scientific or political voices, in what does it rework those voices in the process? I think that by analyzing the varied and often experimental struggles undertaken by socio-cultural texts in building narratives about the environment, scholars can investigate alternative perspectives on nature, culture, and landscapes, and the aesthetic, political, and socio-historical contexts in which they are engaged.

Several women writers like Margaret Atwood, Anita Desai, Kiran, Desai and Arundhati Roy have written extensively about environment in their novels. In India, Arundhati Roy is among the prominent contemporary fiction writers who is also a staunch environmentalist. She was awarded the Booker Prize for her first novel *The God of Small*

*Things*. She is also known for many non-fiction works which talk about the present society and current issues plaguing the society.

Environment is one of the prominent themes in both her novels *The God of Small Things (TGST)* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness (TMUH)*. Seasons, rivers, description of the environment in cities, factories that destroy natural resources are common themes. The opening lines of both the novels start with a vivid imagery of nature. It then bifurcates into man-induced destruction of the environment. It is subtle in *The God of Small Things* and more aggressive in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Her novels are filled with both imaginary/fictional and real places traversing across India and the world too. The ten-year gap between the two novels have made a lot of difference in the way Arundhati Roy has presented issues.

*The God of Small Things* 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, dustgreen trees. Red bananas ripen. Jackfruits burst....But by early June the south-west monsoon breaks and there are three months of wind and water with short spells of sharp, glittering sunshine....The countryside turns on immodest green. Brick walls turn mossgreen.... 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. (1)

So in these lines, while Roy is setting up her novel in Ayemenem (in the lines of her own hometown Aymanam), she is giving it a character using description of the environment of the place. Speaking about the months and the seasons, Roy in the last two lines pinpoints at the inefficiency of the Government and its departments like the PWD which cause the roads to be flooded. Roads in India are laid in such a poor manner by corrupt contractors that potholes appear within months of construction.

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Roy has these lines as her opening:

At magic hour, when the sun has gone but the light has not, armies of flying foxes unbinge themselves from the Banyan trees in the old graveyard and drift across the city like smoke. When the bats leave, the crows come home. Not all the din of their homecoming

fills the silence left by the sparrows that have gone missing, and the old white-backed vultures...that have been wiped out. The vultures died of diclofenac poisoning.

Starting positively with the description of the magic hour of twilight, Roy wasting no time dwells into the negative effects of human greed. It is humans who want to eat 'more ice cream, butterscotch-crunch, nutty-buddy and chocolate chip', drink 'more mango milkshake'. (TMUH). The harsh reality of how the behaviour of humans is affecting the environment and destroying the lives of birds and animals which are as much a part of the living community in this earth is elaborated by the author. This is the theme which runs through the entire novel.

On one side felt that the season remained the same after several years as Rahel arrived in Ayemenem. 'It hadn't changed, the June Rain. Heaven opened and the water hammered down...Green nettles nodded. Trees bent' (TGST 10). On the other hand, there was irreparable destruction of the river.

Years later, when Rahel returned to the river, it greeted her with a ghastly skull's smile... It had shrunk....Downriver, a saltwater barrage had been built, in exchange of votes from the influential paddy-farmer lobby. ...Despite the fact that it was June, and raining, the river was no more than a swollen drain now. A thin ribbon of the thick water that lapped wearily at the mud banks on either side, sequinned with the occasional silver slant of a dead fish. It was choked with a succulent weed...Once it had had the power to evoke fear. ...But now its teeth were drawn, its spirit bent. It was just a slow, sludging green ribbon lawn that ferried fetid garbage to the sea. Bright plastic bags blew across its viscous, weedy surface. (124)

Roy in her very first novel thus reports the havoc caused by the destructive human mind on the environment. She touches upon topics like influential political lobbies and plastic menace. The river is destroyed in such a manner that even seasonal rains is unable to be of any assistance. It is the same river that runs through the novel as a prominent character. It plays a major part in wrecking the lives of several characters in the novel. The same river which caused death and destruction, now is sad, pale shadow of itself. Roy through her vivid imagery presents this devastating picture in her novel *The God of Small Things*.

There is a similar description of the river in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. As Tilo walks near the riverfront and stopped on a bridge, she 'watched a man row a circular raft built with old mineral-water bottles and plastic jerrycans across the thick, slow, filthy river. Buffaloes sank blissfully into the black water. On the pavement vendors sold lush melons and sleek green cucumbers grown in pure factory effluent' (TMUH 234). Giving a true picture of the havoc caused by the river Jhelum, in Kashmir, during the floods, Roy writes: 'When the Jhelum rose and breached its banks, the city disappeared. Whole housing colonies went underwater. Army camps, torture centres, hospitals, courthouses, police stations – all went down. Houseboats floated over what had once been market places' (TMUH 264).

In his article, "Riverbed mining destroys rivers in Jhelum basin", Vaqar Zakaria describes how 'uncontrolled extraction of sand, gravel and boulders from Jhelum and other rivers in the basin is destroying the ecosystem of the rivers'. So whether it is an imaginary river in *The God of Small Things* or real rivers flowing near Delhi, in Kashmir in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, the harm caused by humans to rivers is a salient feature in Arundhati Roy's novels.

In their article "Environmental Concerns in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness: A Critical Study*", authors Syed Wahaj Mohsin and Shaista Taskeen have highlighted this principal feature.

Another blow to the environment as pointed by Roy in the novel is by means of massive dams. The narrator states that, "Massive dams lit up the cities like Christmas trees. Everyone was happy"....These dams promised production of massive hydropower, water for human consumption, irrigation and navigation but in the process they ruined the ecological river system, harmed the aquatic life and did not provide sufficient water to farmers....The hazardous impact of dams ignited the 'Narmada Bachao Andolan' (NBA) headed by social activists Medha Patkar and Baba Amte. Roy participated actively in this andolan (movement). (83)

Hence Roy, an active participant of several social causes, places similar occurrences in her novels too. The Bhopal gas tragedy is recounted in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*.

The struggle of survivors “to demand compensation: clean water and medical care for themselves and the generations of deformed babies who were born after the gas leak” is presented along with related issues plaguing the country and its environment. The pollution choking the capital city of Delhi and causing massive havoc is elaborated in detail in the novel. The marked differences between the ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ is discussed. ‘On the city’s industrial outskirts, in the miles of bright swamp tightly compacted with refuse and colourful plastic bags, where the evicted had been ‘re-settled’, the air was chemical and the water poisonous. Clouds of mosquitoes rose from thick green ponds’ (TMUH 100).

Arundhati Roy, as a prominent contemporary writer and environmentalist, thus uses her writing as a powerful tool, to raise important questions engulfing the society in general and environment in particular. Through both her novels, she creates a clear picture of the destruction of environment and several other environment-related issues in the minds of her readers. Her novels are successful in knocking at the slumber-ridden attitudes of common people and awaken their duty consciousness towards the environment. Destruction of environment is a systematic act of violence caused because of human greed. Each human being who enjoys the positive benefits of the environment, has a moral obligation to save it from the spiralling path of devastation it is moving towards in today’s world.

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