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Research Article



## Issue of River and Dam in the Fiction of Arundhati Roy

**Shyamal Ghosh**

Assistant Professor,  
Department of English  
Gazole Mahavidyalaya  
&


Research Scholar, PhD,  
Dept. of English, Patna University, Patna, Bihar, India

Email: [shyamalghosh334@gmail.com](mailto:shyamalghosh334@gmail.com)

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-1555-7973>

**Dr. N. K. Pandey**

Ex-Professor,  
Department of English,  
Patna University, Bihar, India

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### Abstract

Arundhati Roy is not only an author but also a committed environmentalist and campaigner for human rights. She is widely credited with revitalising the effort to halt the enormous Narmada Dams project, in particular the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam. Besides writing, she

has acquired a distinctive place in the mind of people as an activist. Roy shows a propensity to explore environmental issues and the devastation of the ecosystem due to human avarice in her writings. The river has been the lifeline of our society and culture since ancient times, but in recent times it has lost its glorious past, it has become contaminated and in various cases, its natural flow has been obstructed because of dam construction by providing excuses of modernity and progress. The river water is an integral part of our daily lives, as we drink it, use river water in cultivation, wash our clothes in it, and cook with it. River is a means of livelihood to many. Aquatic organisms find their means of survival there. However, the river has suffered a lot as a result of human interference. In her novel, *The God of Small Things*, and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Arundhati Roy pens down the horrible condition of the river and unplanned dam construction. This paper uses the lens of river ecology to investigate the symbiotic interaction between humans and other species in river ecosystems.

**Keywords:** Ecocriticism, Rivers, Dam, Pollution, Environment, Ecosystem, Ecopolitics, Highlands, Lowlands, Flood, Draught

### Introduction

Since independence the political leaders have dedicated themselves in the dam construction. It was geared up first by Jawarlal Nehru. He argued in his speech that “the dams are the temples of modern India” (*The Cost of Living*, 12). As a result, India is now the third-largest dam builder in the world, having constructed 3,600 major dams. There will soon be another thousand (*The Cost of Living*,14). While academics have been writing and researching, dam builders have been constructing and opponents have been protesting. So, the condition of postcolonial India is poorer than before. There are now more regions in India vulnerable to drought and flooding than there were in 1947. The construction of large dams had promising beginnings but has led to disastrous results. A growing international resistance is emerging. The dams are deactivated and destroyed in the first world. There is now solid evidence that they are counterproductive. When the issues of dying rivers and the potential threat to the freshwater supply came to the forefront, the ecological significance of flowing water became apparent. The environment is an important topic in both *The God of Small Things* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, her two novels. The seasons, rivers and streams, dams, urban landscapes, and polluting factories are recurring topics. Both works’ prologues feature striking descriptions of the environment. Then it branches out into ecological devastation caused by humans.

***The God of Small Things:*** Roy goes to any length to advocate for the freedom of oppressed people. She uses her academic, institutional, and legal clout to advocate for those without a voice in order to end injustice. For instance, she speaks out against the construction of the Narmada dam on the grounds that it will entail the displacement of half a million people. She used the money she won for her first book, *The God of Small Things*, from the Man Booker Prize into this effort. Some people may have disagreed with Roy’s stance on the Narmada dams or India’s nuclear programme. Her work, *The God of Small Things* (1998), was torched by dam supporters in Gujarat as a form of protest against her criticism of the Narmada dam project,

while other reviewers criticised her for having the audacity to write about to begin with politics. Some people feel that Roy's newfound prominence as a political writer is a breath of fresh air for the growing global justice movement. Paul Kingsnorth uses the following words to characterise her in an interview with Roy:

[Roy] has done what few other novelists, in these louche, post-modern times, have dared, or even been inclined to do. She has nailed her colours to the mast. Arundhati Roy is that most unusual, and welcome, of animals: a writer who takes sides. (para, 4)

Nature is a recurring theme in many literary works. The way in which humans are portrayed in literature in relation to their relationship with nature has fundamentally changed as a result of environmental change. In this paper, the researchers want to demonstrate how ecocriticism may be used to analyse the picture of a river via the lens of Arundhati Roy's fictions. She attempts to depict the ecological exploitation of nature by humans under modernity and progress in her works. Dams and barrages are man-made structures that disrupt the natural course of a river. When the physical or chemical properties of water are altered by human construction, the river's biodiversity undergoes a drastic change, and only the creatures that are able to adapt to the new conditions will continue to thrive. When an intervention causes irreparable harm, it may be impossible for the biotic community to recover even if it is later removed. Human interference not only alters the quantity of flow, but also the quality of water, by introducing contaminants that damage the physicochemical properties of the flowing water and, in turn, threaten the biodiversity.

Some common sources of water pollution include industrial discharge, agricultural runoff, and sewage discharge. Human activities such as deforestation and urbanization can also contribute to water pollution by altering the natural water cycle and leading to soil erosion, which can carry pollutants into rivers and streams. The majority of the time, human waste is dumped into rivers. Ecosystems are typically able to self-recover from the volume of wastewater generated, provided that human density is modest and the area is not industrialised. To combat water pollution, it is important to implement proper wastewater treatment and management, reduce non-point source pollution, and promote environmentally-friendly practices in various industries and agriculture.

Ammu and her grandmother, great-grandmother, and great-uncle make their home on the banks of the Meenachal River. Rahel and her brother Estha have been living here since their mother Ammu's divorce. The Kottayam district of Kerala, India, is crossed by the Meenachal River. The river empties into Vembanad Lake after making its way through Erattupetta, Palai, Ettumanoor, and Kottayam, a total of 78 kilometres. The river's water is used for both domestic consumption and agricultural irrigation. Thousands of farms rely on the river's water supply. Many urban areas and major ports are situated along riverbanks. Intense rains during the monsoon season increase the likelihood that the river would rise to flood level or reach its maximum capacity. Locals are worried about the river's diminishing water holding capacity as a result of deforestation, soil erosion, and sand mining. Even the periodic rains cannot help because of how badly the river has been damaged. It is the same river that appears prominently throughout the book. It has a significant impact on how the lives of various individuals in the book are ruined.

It is in this context that she exposes the cruelty of dualisms and draws attention to the environmental harm caused by poorly planned and executed development projects in her novel. The river in Ayemenem is more than just a physical feature; it also acts as a metaphor for the city's socioeconomic and climatic conditions. While Estha was away for 23 years, the old History House in Ayemenem was refurbished into a luxury hotel for tourists and renamed God's Own Country. The hotel used to belong to Kari Saipu, an Englishman who had an affair with a native and then shot himself. As its name suggests, this hotel is the very definition of a modern, forward-thinking India. The toxic elements induced by the state development plan and ecological damage are, nevertheless, noticeable for Estha as she walks along the river dam.

It has become very common in our daily lives that whenever we get distressed, feel bored with our daily stress, anxieties and societal ills, we prefer to dive in the lap of nature and spend some quality in loneliness. The same thing has been shown by Roy in the text in reference to Ammu's life. Ammu's life has been filled with difficult and upsetting events. A girl's mental health is severely damaged when she grows up in a home where her father is abusive to her mother. To find solace, she marries a person of different religion but that marriage did not get success. Coming back to parental house and neglect from them provide a blow in the psyche. Then, Ammu discovers a way to deal with her stress by going to the river and spending time there. The peaceful atmosphere of the river appears to offer her some escape from the worries and tensions of daily life.

The Ganga River is also shown as having religious significance by Arundhati Roy. Rahel, pressed up against a pillar, looked out across the Ganges and saw Karna kneeling to pray. This story has enormous significance in Hinduism. Rahel and Estha travel to a temple to watch a Kathakali dance, and the novel depicts this scene and the Karna play that follows it. When the Ganges River is in full flow, Karna pays homage to it. Rahel is also cognizant of Ganga's religious significance and makes an effort to honour her. Most factories are situated near rivers, discharging their unclean water directly into them, further polluting the waterway. Reading Arundhati Roy's retelling of Rahel's return to Ayemenem, one can see the societal concern she has for conserving natural resources like water. According to Roy's account, the encroachment has caused the river to become narrow and weed-filled with luscious fruits. With the help of the Meenachal River, farmers were able to harvest more rice at a lower cost.

***The Ministry of Utmost Happiness:*** Arundhati Roy's writings have helped to popularise the genre of environmental literature. The reference of dam has come in her nonfiction and fiction. The creation of a gigantic dam that regulates the river's natural flow causes the author's concern that natural order is being disrupted, and she communicates this concern in her writing. Man's misguided attempt to manipulate river flow for his own benefit ultimately had devastating consequences. Narmada dam was believed to have constructed as a public good for the benefit of Madhya Pradesh, Gujrat, and Maharashtra. Its ultimate goal was to make sure that everyday people in the community have access to reliable energy and clean drinking water. It sought to bring water to millions of acres of unproductive farmland. The end result wasn't as good as was expected. These dams were supposed to generate tremendous hydropower, water for human use, agriculture, and navigation, but instead they destroyed the biological river system, hurt aquatic life, and left farmers thirsty. People are sometimes

abandoned by officials who are tasked with rehabilitating them after they are forced to abandon their homes and land so that dams can be built. Many thousands of locals, predominantly Adivasis, were forcibly relocated without compensation. The migrated people or displaced people were not provided the same importance as said earlier: rather they started living inhumane way. The number of percentage that earlier calculated the people will migrate, enhanced doubly and more. The damage to their standard of living, economic security, and cultural identity was permanent. Those who have never faced such horrors in the name of progress cannot fathom the impact of such grandiose buildings on ordinary people who are compelled to relocate to other, more isolated places. Gulabiya Vechania, a minor character in the story who guards the billboard at Jantar Mantar, vividly explains the reality behind huge dam building and its aftermath through a dream. The project is not only bad for the irrigation system because of the floods it causes, but it also uses more electricity than it produces. Because of the massive price tag, the country will be indebted to the World Bank for years to come.

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Roy describes an Indian state that is actively oppressing its people. Roy argues that this violence is justified by Indian national ideology, which is founded on the idea of technological advancement or development and the assumption that the people should suffer in the interest of larger common good. Here Roy has forwarded the right task as an intellectual and paved the Edward Said's concept of "speaking truth to power". It raises questions about and draws attention to the unfair nature of existing social, political, economic, national, and international power systems. A person of intellect who, although on the outside or in a minority, is nevertheless dedicated to advocating for others who are underrepresented or unheard. For Edward Said, the definition and job of an intellectual necessitates speaking out against the authority and in favour of the oppressed and silent. Said Says,

The role of the intellectual is that of testifying: he/she testifies against the misuses of history or against the injustices that befall the oppressed. I should add that he/she must be a rebel against power and against prevailing ideas. The intellectual must raise doubts about the illusions of the status quo, all that is tyrannical in society, especially for the sake of the deprived and the oppressed. (184)

In her critique of government estimates for clean water and rehabilitation initiatives, Roy places those issues within the broader contexts of democracy, culture, and community. She goes even further to connect the Narmada conflict to larger issues of inequality and power imbalance around the world. She frames the Adivasi people's fight as part of a larger worldwide movement for "justice." By penning a piece of literary opposition against the government's dam-building programmes, Roy raises her voice to the world and encourages the privileged to reflect on the role they play in the ideology of progress. Roy criticizes the professional mindset of the present government in this way that the waters of rivers have been sold to companies and massive dams were dressed as Christ-mass trees as the cities are found in Christmas festival. (TMUH, 98).

By writing, "When the Jhelum rose and breached its banks, the city disappeared," Roy paints a realistic picture of the destruction wreaked by the river Jhelum in Kashmir during the floods. Entire neighbourhoods drowned. Everything from military bases to torture chambers to



hospitals to courthouses and police stations was destroyed. Over the sites of former marketplaces, houseboats now bobbed (TMUH 264). Patrick McCully has voiced his view in his book that the benefits of dams have been exaggerated, and their detrimental effects on nature and human culture have been enormous. (Silenced Rivers, introduction, XV)

**Conclusion:** Roy, in the book, *The Cost of Living*, writes that India is the only country that constructs dams, displaces millions of people, floods forests, and destroys ecosystems. Arundhati Roy, a well-known modern author and environmentalist, employs the persuasive power of her writing to bring attention to the pressing issues of dam building and river pollution. Both of her works give a vivid image of ecological devastation and other environmental problems. Her books are able to shake people out of their apathetic slumber and into a sense of environmental responsibility. Human greed is the root cause of the systematic violence that destroys ecological balance. Any person who has benefited in any way from the earth's natural resources has a moral responsibility to work towards reversing the current course of environmental destruction.

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