

## Narrative, Resistance, and Ecological Justice in Arundhati Roy's Writings

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### ABSTRACT

Arundhati Roy occupies a significant place in contemporary Indian writing as both a literary figure and a social activist. Her fiction and non-fiction confront systemic injustice, political oppression, caste discrimination, gendered violence, corporate power, and ecological destruction. Her novels *The God of Small Things* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* give voice to marginalized communities, especially those silenced by caste, gender, sexuality, religion, and state power. In these works, Roy presents the emotional and social lives of people pushed to the edges of society. Her non-fiction works, including *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*, *Walking with the Comrades*, and *The Cost of Living*, offer direct critiques of state violence, corporate greed, militarism, and environmental exploitation. Roy's writing forms a strong connection between narrative and activism. It redefines literature as a space of ethical resistance and public responsibility. Her work also highlights the need for sustainable development and ecological justice. She questions models of progress that destroy communities and natural environments in the name of national growth. Roy's vision of justice is deeply humane and ecological. It recognizes the interdependence of human and non-human life and calls for a more inclusive, balanced, and compassionate future.

**KEYWORDS:** Arundhati Roy, social activism, environmental sustainability, marginalization, ecocriticism, political resistance.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Arundhati Roy holds a distinct place in contemporary Indian literature because she brings together artistic expression and political commitment. Her debut novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997), won the Booker Prize and placed her on the global literary stage. She soon became known as a major voice among Indian writers who wrote from within India rather than from an expatriate location. Yet Roy did not remain within the comfort of literary fame. She used her public position to speak about urgent social, political, and environmental issues.

Roy emerged as a strong critic of state oppression, corporate exploitation, caste injustice, militarism, and environmental destruction. Her writing moves between fiction and public argument. Her novels explore the intimate lives of characters caught in caste, gender, class, and political violence. Her essays speak more directly to the public sphere and challenge the language used by governments, corporations, and institutions to justify injustice.

This paper studies Roy's literary and activist work as a connected body of writing. Her fiction and non-fiction share a deep concern for people whose voices are ignored by dominant structures. Her novels do not simply tell personal stories. They examine the social systems that produce pain, exclusion, and silence. Her essays do not simply express opinion. They question power, expose violence, and ask readers to think about justice in moral and political terms.

Roy's writing shows how literature can become a form of resistance. It turns individual suffering into collective critique. It asks the reader to notice those who are usually pushed aside by history, nationalism, development, and public memory. Through this double role as novelist and activist, Roy reimagines writing as a space of political consciousness and ethical responsibility.

## 2. VOICES OF THE MARGINALIZED IN ROY'S FICTION

Roy's fiction gives special attention to marginalized communities. Her narratives bring their struggles into clear view. She shows how structural inequalities influence the lives of those pushed to the margins of society. Her characters are often women, Dalits, gender-nonconforming people, religious minorities, and those affected by political violence. They suffer under oppressive systems, but they are never presented as empty victims. They think, desire, resist, remember, love, and survive.

Roy's fictional world is built on the tension between personal life and social power. A private relationship, a childhood memory, a forbidden love, or a broken family often reveals a larger history of caste, gender, class, and political authority. Her fiction asks the reader to see that injustice is not abstract. It enters homes, bodies, language, memory, and relationships.

### 2.1 *The God of Small Things*: Caste, Gender, and Social Violence

*The God of Small Things* offers a sharp critique of casteism, patriarchy, and social exclusion. The story of Ammu, a woman who defies social expectations, and Velutha, a Dalit man from the Paravan community, reveals the violence faced by those who cross rigid social boundaries. Their relationship becomes a challenge to caste hierarchy, family honour, and patriarchal control.

The novel is set in Ayemenem, a small town in Kerala. Roy turns this local setting into a powerful representation of larger social oppression. Women and Dalits are denied dignity, choice, opportunity, and equal rights. The "Love Laws" in the novel decide who may be loved, how much, and under what conditions. These laws are social, emotional, and political. They control desire and punish those who refuse obedience.

Ammu and Velutha's love is tragic, yet it is also an act of defiance. Through them, Roy shows how caste and patriarchy work together. Ammu suffers because she is a woman who refuses the role assigned to

her. Velutha suffers because he is a Dalit man who crosses the boundaries imposed by caste society. Their lives reveal how identities overlap and deepen the experience of marginalization.

Roy also creates empathy by taking the reader into the emotional world of her characters. She does not present caste and gender as distant social issues. She shows how they wound the mind, the body, and the family. The suffering of Ammu and Velutha reveals that oppression is complex. It grows through caste, gender, class, family, religion, and state violence.

## 2.2 The Ministry of Utmost Happiness: Gender, Nation, and Belonging

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Roy expands her attention to a wider range of marginalized identities. The novel centres on Anjum, a transgender woman, and her journey toward self-definition in a society that excludes those who do not conform to its norms. Through Anjum and the hijra community, Roy explores gender nonconformity, social rejection, longing, and the search for a place of belonging.

Anjum's life shows the pain of being treated as an outsider. Yet Roy also presents her strength, tenderness, humour, and capacity to build community. Anjum creates a sanctuary for others who have been abandoned or rejected. This space becomes a metaphor for self-determination. It is a place where the unwanted can live with dignity.

The novel also moves into the political conflict in Kashmir. Roy draws attention to the human cost of state violence, militarization, religious polarization, and nationalistic aggression. She portrays people caught between political ideologies and the machinery of power. Their lives reveal how the nation often creates its own outsiders.

Across both novels, Roy insists that marginalized people are not passive sufferers. They possess emotional depth, moral clarity, and the will to resist. Her fiction asks readers to face uncomfortable truths about caste, gender, sexuality, religion, and political violence. It gives a deeper understanding of injustice through lived experience.

## 3. ROY'S NON-FICTION AS PUBLIC ADVOCACY

Arundhati Roy's non-fiction offers a direct critique of institutional power. Her essays speak with urgency against state violence, corporate ambition, global imperialism, and the destructive language of development. While her fiction creates empathy through story, her essays confront the reader with argument, moral force, and political clarity.

Roy's non-fiction consistently takes the side of the oppressed. She writes for Adivasis, displaced communities, political prisoners, minorities, and those who lose land, home, and dignity under the pressure of the state and the market. Her essays question the official versions of progress, democracy, justice, and nationalism.

### 3.1 State Power and Political Hypocrisy

In *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*, Roy examines the moral language used by global powers, especially after the 9/11 attacks. She critiques the use of "justice" to defend war, militarism, and imperial ambition. For Roy, such language hides the realities of displacement, death, fear, and environmental destruction. She argues that powerful nations often use humanitarian words to protect economic and geopolitical interests.

Roy calls for a different idea of justice. Her idea of justice is rooted in empathy, equality, and a refusal to dehumanize others. She resists the division of the world into innocent and guilty, civilized and uncivilized, saviour and enemy. Her essays demand that readers look beyond official language and ask who suffers when powerful states claim to act in the name of justice.

In *Walking with the Comrades*, Roy writes about her time among Naxalite insurgents in central India. She does not simply accept the mainstream description of them as terrorists. She examines the reasons behind their resistance. Land dispossession, mining interests, state violence, and the exploitation of Adivasi communities form the background of her argument.

Roy does not romanticize armed struggle. Yet she asks the state to recognize its own role in creating conflict. Her essay reframes the Naxalite movement as a response to long histories of injustice. It asks whether a democracy can remain moral when it treats its poorest citizens as obstacles to development.

### 3.2 Democracy and Institutional Complicity

In *Listening to Grasshoppers: Field Notes on Democracy*, Roy offers a sharp critique of democratic institutions in India. She argues that democracy becomes hollow when the judiciary, media, corporations, and political leadership protect one another from accountability. In such a system, the language of democracy remains, but its ethical meaning weakens.

Roy warns that dissent is often silenced in the name of national interest. The concerns of ordinary people are pushed aside, while the interests of elites are protected. Her critique shows that democracy cannot be measured only by elections. It must also be measured by justice, freedom, equality, and the ability of the powerless to speak without fear.

### 3.3 Corporate Power and Neo-Imperialism

Roy's critique of development becomes especially clear in *The Cost of Living*. This work examines the destructive effects of mega dam projects and nuclear policies. Roy challenges the celebration of large development projects as signs of national progress. She shows that such projects often displace vulnerable people while benefiting political and corporate interests.

The language of the "greater good" receives strong criticism in Roy's work. She asks who defines this greater good and who pays its price. For displaced Adivasis, small farmers, and rural communities, the cost of development is not abstract. It is the loss of land, livelihood, memory, community, and identity.

Roy's alternative vision of development is inclusive, decentralized, and ecologically responsible. She rejects the idea that progress must always mean large dams, mining projects, militarized zones, and corporate profit. Her writing asks for a form of progress that protects both people and nature.

## 4. ECOLOGY AND ACTIVISM IN ROY'S WRITINGS

Roy's activism is deeply connected with ecological consciousness. Her critique of environmental destruction cannot be separated from her critique of social and political injustice. She shows that the destruction of rivers, forests, lands, and local communities is also a form of violence. Environmental damage affects the poor most severely because their lives are closely tied to land, water, forest, and local ecological systems.

In *The Cost of Living*, Roy examines mega dam projects and their impact on rural and Adivasi communities. She exposes the suffering of those displaced by development projects. She questions the moral claim that a few must suffer for the progress of the many. For Roy, such reasoning hides the violence of unequal development. The people who pay the price are often those who gain the least from the project.

Roy's environmental vision also appears in her fiction. In *The God of Small Things*, the polluted river and damaged backwaters reflect the ecological decline of a society driven by greed and indifference. Nature in the novel is not a simple background. It is a living presence. Its decay echoes the exploitation of human

lives. Roy connects ecological damage with social decay, showing that the violation of nature and the violation of human dignity often arise from the same systems of power.

Her ecological concerns also have links with ecofeminist thought. Roy often identifies parallels between the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women, Dalits, Adivasis, and other marginalized communities. Both nature and the marginalized are treated as resources to be controlled, used, and discarded. Her work challenges anthropocentrism and industrial modernity. It calls for a worldview that respects all forms of life.

Roy's ecological politics is not sentimental. It is ethical and political. She asks readers to rethink the meaning of progress. Development, in her view, should not destroy the very communities and environments it claims to improve. A sustainable future requires balance, dignity, participation, and care. Roy's environmental writing is therefore a call for justice. It connects ecological survival with social equality.

## 5. LITERATURE AS RESISTANCE

Roy's work shows that literature can resist silence. Her fiction and essays move in different forms, but both challenge power. Her novels use memory, emotion, and narrative complexity to reveal the lives of those excluded by caste, gender, sexuality, and state authority. Her essays use argument, witness, and public speech to confront injustice directly.

In Roy's writing, storytelling becomes a political act. The stories of Ammu, Velutha, Anjum, Adivasis, displaced communities, and people living under militarized power are not isolated narratives. They become part of a larger moral map. Roy asks the reader to see how personal suffering is tied to public systems.

Her work also questions the role of the writer. Roy does not accept the idea that the writer should remain detached from public life. She treats writing as a responsibility. The writer must notice what power tries to hide. The writer must listen to the silenced. The writer must speak when institutions fail.

This does not reduce Roy's literary value. Instead, it gives her work force and urgency. Her fiction remains aesthetically powerful, while her activism gives her writing a broader ethical purpose. She shows that literature can be beautiful and political at the same time. It can create art and also demand justice.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Arundhati Roy's literary and activist work offers a strong critique of the systems of power that shape contemporary India. Her writing examines caste, gender, class, religious identity, state violence, corporate greed, and environmental destruction. Her fiction gives voice to those ignored by mainstream narratives. It portrays the inner lives of people who live under the pressure of exclusion. Her non-fiction speaks directly against political hypocrisy, institutional failure, and the violence hidden behind the language of development.

Roy challenges dominant models of progress. She shows that many development projects and militarized policies deepen inequality and damage both human and ecological communities. Her work exposes the role of governments, corporations, media, and other institutions in sustaining injustice under the cover of national interest or economic growth.

Roy redefines the role of the modern writer. She refuses artistic detachment and chooses an engaged public voice. Her writing proves that literature can be both imaginative and interventionist. Through her commitment to environmental sustainability, indigenous rights, gender equality, caste justice, and social responsibility, Roy creates a vision of progress grounded in compassion, equality, and ecological balance.

In an age of political polarization and environmental crisis, Roy's voice remains urgent. Her work asks readers to rethink how they read, live, govern, and imagine the future. She offers criticism, but also hope. Her writing becomes a call for awareness, resistance, and shared responsibility.

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