

# Ecofeminist study of Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

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**Abstract-** *Ecofeminism seeks to confront feminism to examine issues that concerns nature. It also contemplates that environment is the feminist issue. First, coined by Francoise D'Eaubonne in 1974, "ecofeminism," is a term that is concerned with the interconnection between the domination and exploitation of nature and the domination and exploitation of women under patriarchal society. Ecofeminists, writers, activists through their writings and activism have tried to empower women and contributed in the preservation and maintenance of environment. India has a history of women-led environmental activism and movements like Bishnois in Rajasthan and Chipko Movement in Uttarakhand emerged before ecocriticism paved its way as an academic inculcated in the Western society.*

*Arundhati Roy, a highly acclaimed ecofeminist writer of Indian English Literature intensifies her concern for the exploitation of environment and women. This paper seeks to outline Arundhati Roy's latest novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* as the subject to represent the complexities of the relationship between nature and women and manifest the non-anthropocentric attitude towards nature. It also draws out the plight of trans woman, marginalized and revolutionary women and their roles to uncover the exploitative leanings of the patriarchal society in which male plays the dominating role. The author unfolds the demise of old birds and animals being the victim of unethical modernization, rehabilitation and scientific technology. Using the ecofeminist lens, this paper aims to trace how nature can be embraced to transform the gendered issues that have been established to mute, women and other non-human life.*

**Keywords:** ecofeminism, non-anthropocentrism, ecocritical, patriarchy, environment, gender

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## Introduction

Ecofeminism broadens the study of literature, art and theories of feminism and environment. Its primary concern is the treatment of ecological degradation and the status of women in the patriarchal society. Literature well known for contemplating the contemporary issues could not have remained unaffected from ecofeminism. Many Indian novelists not only explore the female oppression but also investigate their psychological, biological and social environment. The plight of Indian women can be significantly acquired by the way they lived their lives down the ages. Men and women had different roles in production towards the environment. Men and women were perceived different in terms of their attribution towards nature where women are featured as being domestic, moral, pure, gentle, kind, simple and beautiful whereas men were seen as industrial, rational, authoritative, independent and arrogant. None of the characteristics of men connects them with nature. Indian women novelists, like Arundhati Roy has earned respect by winning the prestigious awards like the Lannan Cultural Freedom Award in 2002, the Sydney Peace Prize in 2004, and the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2006 and her presence cannot be sidelined in English Literature. Roy's role in Narmada Bachao Andolan and her concern towards the effects of the nuclear testing and her support for Kashmiri independence proves her serious concern for environment and human rights. She wrote *Walking with the Comrades* in 2011 to support Moist insurgency groups. In 1997, Roy became a world figure in the golden jubilee year of Indian independence with the publication of her debut novel, *The God of Small Things*, the biggest-selling book which won the Man Booker Prize for Fiction. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, her first novel in twenty years published in 2017. Her fictions

are often commended for their multilayered, complex narrative structure that explores equally complex relationship between nature, women and memory.

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* consists of numerous level narrative ranging from ancient history to the present time through using the flashbacks. It investigates various environmental and feminist issues and my thoroughgoing aim in this paper is to manifest Roy's influential task in the light of ecofeminism. This paper seeks to combine all the shattered stories in the light of ecofeminist perspective and define how women and other humiliated characters struggles for happiness and survives in the patriarchal society where people are least concerned about the ecological sustenance.

### OBJECTIVES:

- To investigate the evidences of ecofeminism in "*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*".
- To examine whether or not narratives by Arundhati Roy manifest and even contest the ways, ecofeminist perspectives are spoken about and theorised.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The modern ecofeminist theory investigates the relationship between women and the natural world, particularly, in terms of their interconnection of each upon the other. Besides, it also analyses their potential to promote the desirable connection as a way to get over the environmental and societal degradation today. In this research paper, I have used the explanatory method of research. This paper is an attempt to discover Arundhati Roy's expression of Nature and women as equally essential for the peace and harmony of the society.

### Emergence of Ecofeminism in India

Countries like Africa, South Asia, particularly India, have a history of environmental activism and movements even before ecocriticism emerged as an academic indoctrinate in the Western society. Women from the Third World have emerged to raise the consciousness about the importance of nature as a fundamental part of human lives through activism. The movement by Bishnois (1731) and The Chipko movement (1973) has acquired a conventional position and is now, a successful example of environmental activism in India. They are labelled as ecofeminist movement in India. These movements strengthen the confidence of women and prepare them to struggle against injustice. First coined by Francoise D'Eaubonne in 1974, "ecofeminism," is a term that is concerned with the interconnection between the domination and exploitation of nature and the domination and exploitation of women. This suggests that ecofeminism is a feminist theory that is actively informed by ecology. It broadens the theory of feminism to include the domination of nature.

### Theoretical Background

Before further textual explanation, it is very important to throw some light on theoretical framework that how the oppression of women and nature commenced the evolution of ecofeminism as a literary theory, a belief that both women and nature are united through their shared history of oppression by an uncaring patriarchal society. However, the concern for ecology and women and the threat that the continuous misuse of our environment poses on humanity has only recently caught the attention of the writers.

Feminism is the movement that advocates the rights for women whereas ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the environment. The distinction between ecocriticism and ecofeminism can be outlined through Estok clear observations:

that the two approaches "complement each other and [work] toward defining more fully what each approach envisions" (Estok). The ecological calamity on earth are directly provoked by the human beings disregarding the rights of the other components of nature. Hence, Estok argues that "in ecofeminism, nature is the central category of analysis" (Estok). Feminism involves patriarchal existence, in contrary, ecofeminism, the patriarchy dominates the environment and also women. He also points out that "[...] the hatred of women and the hatred of nature are intimately connected and mutually reinforcing" (Estok). His observation recognizes the interconnection between the oppression of human and nonhuman nature.

According to the ecofeminist, Vandana Shiva, in her book *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* says, “the worldview that causes environmental degradation and injustice is the same worldview that causes a culture of male domination, exploitation and inequality for women” (Shiva). Ynestra King in Warren’s *Ecofeminism* (1997), extends the distinction between feminism and ecofeminism; “Ecofeminism’s challenge of social domination extends beyond sex to social domination of all kinds, because the domination of sex, race, and class and the domination of nature are mutually reinforcing” (Warren).

According to Ariel Salleh, “there is a parallel in men’s thinking between their right to exploit nature and their exploitation of women” (Salleh). Salleh links men’s oppression of nature with men’s oppression of women. If on one hand, Men are seen going out for hunting, killing animals for their needs, degrading the ecosystem to build industries and other such entities. On the other hand, women who are aware about sustaining nature and environmental issues have been able to make appreciable difference to the environment in definite ways, for instance, water conservation, waste management, energy efficiency at home. This interpretation reveals the connection between women and natural environment, stemmed not only in the ideological sphere of women closeness to nature for their biological reasons, but also as a source of life.

### **Evidence of Ecofeminism in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness***

In the novel, Roy explores the environment degradation and the plight of women and their conflicts with the outside world. She has depicted a series of shattered stories revolving around different characters, multiple issues, concerning self and society, and highlighting the sufferings of natural habitat and women who have been denied access to education, equal rights, right to work and freedom to choose for a long passage of time.

Roy describes a transwoman, Anjum, a ‘dual being’ swinging between hope and despair and is one of the so-called “others” in society. Transgender people are the individuals who identify their roles as the opposite of their biological sexes and their behavior differ from the stereotyped gender norms. Roy deals with many such characters with complex gender history. Roy, with the central character Anjum born Aftab with partial female sex organs together with the male, manifests a journey of self-discovery in which the social structures of normality and otherness are revealed. Anjum who is an intersex, with both male and female crotch, leaves her mother, Jahanara Begum baffled who expected a son but the birth of a hermaphrodite was less acceptable by the father, Mulaqat Ali who tries to modify Anjum’s biological sex organ into the male organ which is against the nature and contemplates this would bring shame on the rest of the family. According to him, a person who is perceived by majority of people as a traditional man should act like one.

“He chose to sever all ties with his son. He never met Anjum...Occasionally they would pass each other on street and would exchange glances, but never greetings” (Roy 25).

Indian patriarchal society remains a society where traditional values, Orthodoxy, social circle and social expectations constructs a significant role of an individual’s identity. Additionally, concepts such as disgrace and honour plays a crucial role in all frame of references and social obligations in order to protect the family’s honour also comprise gender performance.

Roy opens the novel with the prologue describing the condition of Anjum who is torn into pieces by the hostile social forces and asks the Imam:

“you tell me where do old birds go to die? Do they fall on us like stones from the sky? Do we stumble on their bodies in the streets? Do you not think that the All-seeing, Almighty one who put us on this earth has made proper arrangements to take us away?” (Roy 5)

This suggests the fact that old birds like old people are generally rejected by the society. Such people are usually disposed away from the world of pleasure. Equally discarded is Anjum who is not considered as a part of society her entire life. She is showing her concern towards the demise of old birds (Delhi’s vultures) – victims of a new chemical- diclofenac, introduced into the ecosystem given to cows to extract more milk. While Delhi indulges itself on ice cream, Roy ironically criticizes the humanity, “Not many noticed the passing of the friendly old birds” (Roy), as people have so much to look forward to.

The novel begins and ends in the graveyard which certainly becomes Anjum's home after her migration from Khwabgah. Roy chose a graveyard to describe another world, where dead and living coexist to avoid the rules the other people governed by. She finds solace in graveyard which reflects the link between the both. Graveyard is a place to dispose of bodies, Anjum who was suffering with the demands of her body her entire life could find tranquility in her paradise, the refuge for the utmost happiness.

Animals are seen as mere machines and are exploited in the creation of modern society. Historically, the practice of hunting was taken as an ethical discourse and a masculine activity, to create sport and adventure in the name of experiencing the nature. As hunting became ethical so killing animals in the name experience had to be valid. Nowadays, the use of living animals in laboratories, deteriorating and killing are given noble cause. Roy comments on the absurdity of the mankind who tortures these creatures in the name of discoveries. She describes "... a beagle who had either escaped from or outlived his purpose in a pharmaceutical testing lab. He looked worn and rubbed out, like a drawing someone had tried to erase...with the drugs tested on him." (82).

In an illusion of scientific advancement or hybridity, these animals face incalculable brutality by the greedy people's hand. Anjum who is portrayed as a gatherer cherishes the wandering dog, Biroo in her guest house. She "...poured a little tea ...He slurped it up noisily. He drank everything Anjum drank, ate everything that she ate... it was terrible for his body, but excellent for his soul." (Roy 83). Greta Gaard in her article says, "women, water and energy: an ecofeminist approach" states "More than a theory of feminism and environmentalism or women and nature, as the name might imply, ecofeminist approaches the problems of environmental degradation life. and social justice from the premise that how we treat nature and how we treat each other are inseparably linked" (Gaard 158).

Roy portrays ecofeminist bolt through Anjum who converts the graveyard into the vibrant, colourful guest house called Jannat- a paradise. Saddam Hussain's marriage, Tilo's School and Zainab's little zoo – 'a Noah's Ark of injured animals' becomes the part of her sanctuary. She has conceptualized an opposite of the Garden of Eden—a paradise whose defining characteristics, instead of innocence, is experience and permanence which becomes Anjum's world. Roy restates about Nature's outrage. We exploit these souls for our own benefit and try to modify its evolution by the help of science. She also criticizes the society that try to modify people and the environment according to their desires. Anjum's sexuality and ecological beings are seen mere objects to the people who exploit other minor sections for their needs and greed.

Roy describes the dark beauty S. Tilottama or Tilo, another major protagonist, a woman of modern era. Her lack of desire to tie the knot with Naga caused her misery and stigma which further complicated the situation when Naga, preferably slaps his wife Tilo, following his friend's suggestion: "What she needs, I'm sorry to say, is two tight slaps. This modern approach of yours doesn't always work. At the end of the day we're all animals. We need to be shown our place" (Roy 232). Nagaraj who works for Intelligence Bureau is advised by his friend to slap his wife which implies even if you cannot reason behind your sentiments and emotionally attached to someone to the point that justice becomes secondary consideration, then your education and exposure is useless.

Roy incarnates the dismal life of animals in Delhi zoological park when Tilo detects the miserable life of zoo animal where authorities are only pretending of their welfare. she foresees the dilemma of the Gibbon who is living on tree for its littered cage and Hippo is swimming in a dirty pond, tortured by the visitors for their entertainment. Roy suggests the significance of morality through Tilo when she mocks a group of noisy men, she "congratulated them for the courage it must require to feed a caged hippo razor blades" (235) they couldn't tolerate the insult and started taunting her with degraded names- "Oye! Hapshie madam! Hey! Nigger Madam!" because of her dark complexion.

Our verbal expressions and the way we speak enable us to oppress women and non-human animals. We justify exploiting other species by naming them "animals" without recognizing that we are also animals. Joan Dunayar writes "We view them as inferior and we feel entitled to dominate them, just as we have done to marginalized human groups" (11). They called her 'Nigger', 'Hapshie'- hindi for Abyssinian, when a woman is exclaimed by such names she is being called unattractive or ugly. Therefore, all Abyssinian are integrated into the category of "ugly". Most of the degraded words used to describe women are words which represents domestic animals such as cow, bitch, Bull, cat and so on. All these expressions separate human

from non-human species and rationalize their abuse, at the same time, using same expressions to oppress women and other marginalized groups.

The author severely criticizes the anthropocentrism and the modernism that has not left any place for the non-human species to live peacefully. She reveals Hauz Khas, South Delhi incident where “a cow that had died – burst – from eating too many plastic bags at the main garbage dump” . (264) The city’s congested lifestyle, disease-ridden atmosphere has acquired the land and resources that left nothing for the lower species except plastic to eat.

Roy criticizes the modern development policy which has left no place to survive in the poisonous environment for the non-human species to live. One such instance is observed when Tilo witnesses a curious scientific phenomenon when two bulls “appear quite normal but at night they grow tall...When they piss, they lift their legs like dogs...are they bulls or dogs? Or wolves?” (298). She observed the changes in the cow which manifests the scientific experimentation performed on them. She also examines the poultry industry injects the hens “to increase the efficiency of egg production” (299). The novel delineates the toxic chemicals that are tested on the laboratory animals to check its lethality and the factory farming are primarily degrading the environment and oppressing the natural species. Unethical modernity is destroying the world by its wicked and injudicious ways of utilization. Greta Gaard criticizes such advancement and asserts that:

“these hazardous chemicals are often initially tested on laboratory animals to determine levels of toxicity; this practice, together with the enormous environmental costs of factory farming and meat eating, demonstrate the linkages between environmental degradation and the oppression of nonhuman animals (speciesism)” (Gaard 5).

The novel deals with the modern people torn between society norms. Roy incarnates the place of a woman in the foresaid society who believes that women are subject to violence and can be mould accordingly. There are rigid gender roles, where women are liable to have a passive role and husband an active dominating role. Marriage and motherhood are the major status roles for women. The husband-wife relationship has been taken up to uncover the exploitative leanings of the patriarchal society in which male plays the dominating role and proves that man has not yet evolved and are still animals. Even after emerging as a rebellion against their exploitation, women have to compromise for the sake of solidarity of the family.

Tilo’s mother, Maryam Ipe, stays unmarried and dedicated her life to the school, known for its innovative teaching methods. “...articles spanned a period of several years- some were about her school, its teaching methods and its beautiful campus, some were about the social and environmental campaigns that she led or the awards she had won” (239). She is described as an iconic feminist in the novel who struggles to survive in the conservative society. She was abandoned by the family for keeping an affair with a ‘Paraya’ and sent to the orphanage until her baby born. She remained unmarried and overcame all the bullies and admired by the same society who tormented her. She became an inspiration for the woman who aspires to fulfill their dreams and desires. Roy criticizes the patriarchal society where a woman is forced to abandon her own child who is born out of wedlock. She rejects such society where motherhood is an approval for only those who are married. Single unmarried mothers are not accepted in a patriarchal society. Even in the sphere of artificial reproductive practice, infertile married women are accepted as preferred ones, not the ones who are unmarried. It uncovers the racism of society. Such a condition exhibits the male domination with reference to above mentioned situations and an indirect indication towards accepted belief of femininity. Roy has revealed that today, unmarried mothers and homosexuals espousing children have totally changed the social outlook of parenthood.

She comments on the number of ways Adivasi people are exploited by the elite class. Revathy or Comrade Masse, highly influenced by Marx and Lenin becomes a Maoist. She portrays the desolation of their fertile land by the modern technology. Though Adivasi women are the most exploited and marginalized people in our country so is the situation of oppressed classes. These women in the revolutionary movements are working for the bright future of the tribe by sustaining the resources. Among the tribal, Roy identifies feminists emerging in ‘unfeminine’ ventures and refusing patriarchal social and power structures. Female revolutionary or reformists come across a number of hurdles where they face sexual exploitation by the outsiders. She describes the cruelty of these outsiders who seized Revathy by force since

she worked for the PLGA<sup>1</sup> and was brutally raped by a number of official... "cutting my skin with a knife-blade. 'so, you think you are a great heroine?'...two are holding my hands and two are holding legs. 'we want to give you a gift for your party'...they all raped me many times" (423). Rape is contemplated as a tool of domination and oppression in the hands of men which is used against women. As women are vulnerable to violence which symbolizes male domination. It allows men the authority to brutalize women. Susan Brown miller speaks about the fear of rape which shapes a woman's psychology and directs her movements and thoughts, she says rape, "is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear" (Brownmiller 15).

Roy asserts the social, economic, political and cultural conditions of the Adivasi women highlights the fact that until the exploitation and oppression of the landholders, industrialists and the imperialists ends and the patriarchal oppression is controlled, Adivasi women cannot be liberated. Both these struggles have to be practiced mutually by men and women.

## Conclusion

Thus, Arundhati Roy's novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* exhibits the interconnectedness of women and nature. Using the ecofeminist lens, she has explored how nature can be embraced to transform the gendered issues that have been established to mute women and other non-human life. Roy has tried to uncover the brutal fact that the nature and women are taken as resource to fulfill men's needs which is prevalent in the present world. Both are oppressed and raped in their own ways therefore, both must be eradicated to end the oppression. Ecofeminism devises women as having the capability to generate ecological change. It can be seen as asserting women by emphasizing their close association with nature. Roy, through her novel was able to encourage and induce women to become the representatives of change. She has penned all the events beautifully in her present novel and proficiently highlights the uncertain relationship between women and nature in the present world.

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