



A Contemporary Analysis of Arundhati Roy's Literature, Social Activism, and Environmental sustainability

*A. M. Jansi¹, Dr. N. Sowmia Kumar²

¹ Part-time PhD Scholar in English, H. H. The Rajah's College, Pudukkottai. (Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli).

² Research Supervisor & Assistant Professor of English, H. H. The Rajah's College, Pudukkottai. (Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli).

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*Corresponding author: [A. M. Jansi](#)

Part-time PhD Scholar in English, H. H. The Rajah's College, Pudukkottai. (Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli).

Abstract

*In this paper, we explore the dual role of Arundhati Roy as a literary icon and social activist. It shows how her fiction and non-fiction confront systemic injustice, political oppression, and ecological degradation. Through close readings of *The God of Small Things* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, we reveal how Roy gives voice to marginalized communities, especially those silenced by caste, gender, and identity politics. Her nonfiction works, including *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*, *Walking with the Comrades*, and *The Cost of Living*, provide direct critiques of state violence, corporate greed, and ecological exploitation. Roy's writing forms a powerful nexus of narrative and activism, one that redefines literature as a space for ethical resistance. We also highlight her advocacy for sustainable development and ecological justice. Roy reimagines progress through a biocentric perspective that recognizes the interconnectedness of human and non-human life. Her work ultimately calls for a more humane, inclusive, and ecologically balanced future.*

Keywords: Arundhati Roy, Social activism, Environmental sustainability, Marginalization, Ecocriticism, Political resistance.

1. Arundhati Roy and Literature for Social Activism

Arundhati Roy holds a distinct place in contemporary Indian literature for her ability to merge artistic expression with political engagement. Her debut novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997) won the Booker Prize and placed her on the global literary stage. She gained recognition as a major voice among non-expatriate Indian writers. Rather than stay within the confines of literary fame, Roy used her platform to address urgent political and social issues. She emerged as a vocal critic of state oppression, corporate exploitation, and environmental degradation. In this paper we argue that Roy's body of work—both her evocative fiction and her direct, polemical non-fiction—demonstrates a sustained commitment to confronting systems of power and advocating for marginalized communities. Her novels do not merely tell stories; they interrogate the underlying structures of caste, gender, and class that shape lived experiences in India. Her non-fiction, in turn, serves as a platform for public dissent, challenges dominant narratives, and amplifies the voices of the silenced. Roy's literary and activist trajectories are deeply intertwined. Whether through the personal tragedies of fictional characters or the analytical depth of her essays, she consistently exposes the mechanisms of injustice while demanding accountability and reform. Her work shows how literature can serve as a form of resistance and turn individual narratives into collective critique. Through this dual approach, Roy reimagines literature as a space for political consciousness and ethical responsibility.

2. Voices of the Marginalized and Roy's Fiction

Roy powerfully reveals the experiences of marginalized communities and brings their struggles into sharp focus. Her narratives do not offer passive depictions but actively engage with injustice. They show how structural inequalities shape

the lives of those pushed to the margins of society. Her characters—often women, Dalits, or gender-nonconforming individuals—are not merely victims but complex figures who resist, endure, and assert their agency within oppressive systems.

2.1 *The God of Small Things* (1997): Exposing Systemic Injustice

Roy's debut novel, *The God of Small Things*, offers a piercing critique of casteism, patriarchy, and social exclusion. The story of Ammu, a woman who dares to defy societal expectations, and Velutha, a Dalit man from the Paravan community, foregrounds the brutal consequences faced by those who transgress rigid social boundaries. Their relationship exposes the deep-seated mechanisms of caste-based discrimination and the violence meted out to those who challenge the status quo. Set in Ayemenem, a small town in Kerala, the novel transforms the local landscape into a microcosm of broader social oppression. Women and untouchables are systematically denied dignity, opportunity, and basic rights. Yet Roy's portrayal of Ammu and Velutha also reflects resilience—their love, though ultimately tragic, becomes an act of defiance. Roy thus reframes victimhood, highlighting emotional strength and the refusal to be silenced. Beyond their individual stories, the novel uncovers how intersecting identities—caste, gender, and class—compound the experience of marginalization. Roy skilfully builds empathy by drawing the reader into the intimate emotional lives of her characters. She turns abstract social issues into deeply human experiences. The suffering of Ammu and Velutha reveals that oppression is multifaceted, with systemic inequalities overlapping and reinforcing one another.

2.2 *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*: Broadening the Scope of Exclusion

In her second novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Roy expands her focus to encompass a wider array of marginalized identities. The story centres on Anjum, a transgender woman, and her journey toward self-definition in a society that ostracizes those who do not conform. Through Anjum and the hijra community, Roy explores themes of gender nonconformity, exclusion, and the longing for acceptance. The novel also examines political conflicts, especially the turmoil in Kashmir. It draws attention to the human cost of state violence and religious polarization. In portraying the lives of those caught between political ideologies and systemic neglect, Roy challenges readers to rethink the boundaries of identity and belonging. Anjum's creation of a sanctuary for others like her becomes a metaphor for self-determination—a reclamation of space and voice in a world that marginalizes difference. Across both novels, Roy insists that the marginalized are not passive sufferers but individuals capable of profound emotional insight, moral clarity, and resistance. Her fiction urges readers to face uncomfortable truths about exclusion and power. It offers a deeper understanding of injustice through the realities of lived experience.

3. Roy's Non-Fiction Works as Advocacy

Arundhati Roy's non-fiction offers an unflinching critique of institutional power and functions as a platform for activism. Her essays expose the structural violence embedded in state policy, corporate ambition, and global imperialism. While her fiction evokes empathy through narrative, her non-fiction confronts readers directly with analysis, data, and impassioned argumentation. Roy consistently takes the side of the oppressed. She uses her writing to question dominant ideologies and calls for systemic change.

3.1 Appraisal of State and Political Hypocrisy

In *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*, Roy dismantles the moral pretensions of global powers, particularly in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. She critiques the language of "justice" used to justify militarism and shows how it obscures the realities of displacement, violence, and environmental destruction. Roy insists that imperialistic rhetoric often masks the pursuit of economic and geopolitical control under the guise of humanitarian intervention. She calls for a radically redefined concept of justice—one grounded in empathy, equity, and a refusal to dehumanize others.

Similarly, in *Walking with the Comrades*, Roy recounts her time among Naxalite insurgents in central India. Rather than accepting the mainstream portrayal of these groups as terrorists, she explores the root causes of their resistance: land dispossession, exploitation of Adivasi communities, and the violence of state-sponsored development. Roy does not romanticize armed struggle, but she demands that the state acknowledge its own role in perpetuating conflict and marginalization. Her narrative reframes the Naxalite movement not as anti-national, but as a response to deep-seated injustice.

3.2 Challenging Institutional Complicity

In *Listening to Grasshoppers: Field Notes on Democracy*, Roy offers a sharp indictment of democratic institutions in India. She argues that the judiciary, media, corporations, and political leadership often act in collusion. This alliance enables corruption and protects each group from accountability. Roy warns that democracy is being hollowed out by systemic complicity, where dissent is stifled, and the interests of the elite prevail over those of the people.

3.3 Exposing Corporate Greed and Neo-Imperialism

Roy continues her critique of development in *The Cost of Living*, which focuses on the destructive impact of mega dam projects and nuclear policies. She challenges the celebratory narratives of national progress, exposing how such projects displace vulnerable populations while enriching corporate and political interests. Roy shows how the language of the “greater good” conceals an economic model that is both ecologically unsustainable and socially unjust. The cost, she argues, is not merely economic or environmental—it is human. The dispossession of Adivasis, small farmers, and rural communities is treated as collateral damage in the pursuit of industrial ambition. Roy proposes an alternative vision of development: one that is inclusive, decentralized, and rooted in ecological sustainability.

4. Ecology and Activism in Roy’s Writings

Arundhati Roy’s activism is deeply rooted in her ecological consciousness, and her critique of environmental degradation is inseparable from her broader resistance to social and political injustice. Through both fiction and non-fiction, she challenges development narratives that prioritize economic growth while marginalizing indigenous communities and devastating ecosystems. Her work frames environmental destruction not merely as a byproduct of progress, but as a form of structural violence inflicted on the most vulnerable.

In *The Cost of Living*, Roy directly targets India’s mega dam projects and reveals the displacement and suffering faced by countless rural and Adivasi communities. She critiques the rhetoric of the “greater common good” and shows that it serves as a moral cover for policies that privilege urban elites and corporate interests. Projects like the Polavaram Dam are shown not as feats of engineering, but as instruments of exploitation that sever people from their lands and identities. Roy proposes alternative, decentralized models of development rooted in ecological sustainability and local participation—models that reject the violent logic of top-down planning.

Her ecological vision is also threaded through her fiction. In *The God of Small Things*, decaying rivers and polluted backwaters reflect the environmental consequences of a society driven by greed and indifference. Nature is not just a setting but a living presence, its violation echoing the exploitation of human lives. Roy’s narrative insists on the interconnectedness of ecological and social decay, linking the erosion of natural landscapes to the collapse of traditional communities and ethical values.

Roy’s environmental stance also draws from ecofeminism, as she identifies parallels between the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women and marginalized groups. Her work consistently critiques anthropocentrism and industrial modernity. She calls instead for a biocentric worldview that respects all life. She opposes the use of ecological resources as commodities and calls for a radical rethinking of progress—one that embraces balance, dignity, and sustainability. In this way, Roy’s environmental writings are never apolitical. They are part of a larger call for justice—social, economic, and ecological. Whether addressing forced displacement, degraded ecosystems, or corporate greed, Roy presents environmental activism as a moral imperative and a form of resistance against the structural inequalities embedded in contemporary development practices.

5. Conclusion

Arundhati Roy’s literary and activist work offers a profound critique of the interconnected systems of power that shape contemporary India—be it caste, gender, class, state violence, or environmental exploitation. Her fiction gives voice to those rendered invisible by mainstream narratives. It portrays the lived realities of individuals who endure the weight of social exclusion. Through intimate, emotionally resonant stories, she humanizes structural injustices. She urges readers to confront the complexities of marginalization and resilience. In parallel, her non-fiction writings offer direct, uncompromising analyses of political hypocrisy, corporate greed, and the failings of modern democracy. Roy challenges dominant models of progress. She shows how development projects and militarized policies often deepen inequality and destroy both human and ecological communities. Her work stresses the complicity of institutions—governments, corporations, and media—in perpetuating systemic harm under the guise of national interest or economic growth. Roy redefines what it means to be a writer in the modern world. She rejects the notion of artistic detachment and instead embraces an engaged, interventionist role. Her fusion of storytelling and activism demonstrates that literature can be both aesthetically powerful and politically transformative. By advocating for environmental sustainability, indigenous rights, gender equality, and social justice, Roy constructs a vision of progress grounded in compassion, equity, and ecological integrity. In a time of increasing polarization and environmental crisis, Roy’s voice remains urgent and necessary. Her work makes us rethink how we read, live, govern, and imagine the future. With her strong commitment to truth and justice, Roy offers both criticism and hope—a call for awareness, resistance, and shared responsibility.

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