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Environmental Degradation and Social Injustice in Arundhati Roy's *The Greater Common Good* and *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract

Environmental degradation has become a significant concern in contemporary literature, particularly in postcolonial societies where ecological destruction is closely associated with economic development, political power, and social inequality. Arundhati Roy's writings critically examine the environmental consequences of development policies and the unequal distribution of their costs. This paper analyses environmental degradation in Roy's essay *The Greater Common Good* and her novel *The God of Small Things*. The study explores the representation of large-scale development projects, ecological destruction, river pollution, capitalist expansion, and the marginalisation of vulnerable communities. Employing ecocriticism, postcolonial environmental criticism, and environmental justice as theoretical frameworks, the paper argues that Roy challenges the assumption that development necessarily leads to social progress. In *The Greater Common Good*, the construction of large dams is associated with environmental destruction, displacement, and the dispossession of economically disadvantaged populations. In *The God of Small Things*, the deterioration of the Meenachil River symbolises the consequences of modern development, tourism, consumerism, and the weakening of human relationships with nature. The study demonstrates that Roy represents environmental degradation as a deeply political issue connected with social injustice, cultural loss, and unequal power relations.

Keywords: Environmental degradation, ecocriticism, environmental justice, postcolonial literature, development, displacement, Arundhati Roy, capitalism.

1. Introduction

Environmental degradation has emerged as one of the major challenges of contemporary society. Industrialisation, urbanisation, deforestation, pollution, large-scale infrastructure projects, and excessive exploitation of natural resources have significantly altered ecological systems. Although environmental destruction is often discussed as a scientific or economic issue, literature reveals its human, cultural, political, and ethical dimensions. Literary representations of ecological crisis make visible the suffering of communities whose lives and livelihoods are directly connected with the natural environment.

In postcolonial societies, environmental degradation is frequently associated with unequal development and historical structures of exploitation. Colonial economic systems transformed natural resources into commodities and established patterns of extraction that continued in many forms after independence.

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Postcolonial development policies have sometimes prioritised industrial growth, infrastructure, and economic expansion over environmental sustainability and the rights of local communities.

Arundhati Roy is an important contemporary Indian writer whose literary and political writings critically examine the relationship between development, power, inequality, and environmental destruction. Her essay *The Greater Common Good* challenges the justification of large dams as instruments of national progress and examines their social and ecological consequences. Her novel *The God of Small Things* presents the transformation of the natural landscape of Kerala, particularly the deterioration of the Meenachil River, through the forces of modernisation, tourism, consumerism, and social change.

Roy's environmental criticism is particularly significant because she does not treat nature and society as separate domains. Environmental destruction is connected with caste, class, gender, economic exploitation, and political marginalisation. Her writings suggest that the destruction of the environment and the oppression of vulnerable people frequently emerge from similar structures of domination.

This paper examines how Roy represents environmental degradation in *The Greater Common Good* and *The God of Small Things*. It argues that her writings challenge development-oriented ideologies and reveal the environmental and social costs of modernisation.

2. Research Problem

The central research problem of this study is the representation of environmental degradation as a consequence of unequal development and social power in Arundhati Roy's writings.

Development projects are frequently justified through their contribution to economic growth, national progress, and public welfare. However, their environmental consequences and social costs are often experienced disproportionately by rural communities, indigenous populations, farmers, and economically disadvantaged groups.

Roy's writings challenge the dominant narrative of development by examining the destruction of natural resources, the displacement of communities, and the marginalisation of people whose lives depend upon the environment.

The study investigates how environmental degradation in Roy's selected works functions as a symbol and consequence of broader social, economic, and political inequalities.

3. Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are:

1. To examine the representation of environmental degradation in *The Greater Common Good* and *The God of Small Things*.

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2. To analyse Roy's critique of development projects and modernisation.
3. To explore the relationship between ecological destruction and social inequality.
4. To investigate the representation of river pollution, environmental transformation, and the loss of ecological harmony.
5. To examine how Roy connects environmental degradation with displacement, marginalisation, and environmental justice.

4. Research Questions

The study addresses the following questions:

1. How does Arundhati Roy represent environmental degradation in her selected works?
2. How does Roy challenge dominant narratives of development and economic progress?
3. What is the relationship between environmental destruction and the marginalisation of vulnerable communities?
4. How does the Meenachil River function as a symbol of ecological deterioration in *The God of Small Things*?
5. How do Roy's writings contribute to the understanding of environmental justice in postcolonial India?

5. Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This study employs qualitative textual analysis and close reading of the selected works. It examines imagery, symbolism, narrative structure, descriptions of landscape, political discourse, and the representation of human relationships with the natural environment.

The theoretical framework draws upon ecocriticism, postcolonial ecocriticism, and environmental justice.

Ecocriticism examines the relationship between literature and the physical environment. It analyses how literary texts represent nature, ecological destruction, environmental consciousness, and the relationship between human beings and non-human life.

Postcolonial ecocriticism explores the connections between colonial histories, economic exploitation, environmental destruction, and social inequality. It challenges the assumption that environmental concerns can be separated from historical and political structures.

Environmental justice examines the unequal distribution of environmental benefits and risks. It is particularly concerned with communities that experience environmental destruction while having limited participation in decisions concerning their land, resources, and livelihoods.

Through these frameworks, Roy's writings are analysed as literary interventions into debates about development, environmental protection, political responsibility, and social justice.

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6. Environmental Degradation and Development in *The Greater Common Good*

Arundhati Roy's *The Greater Common Good* is a powerful critique of large-scale development projects, particularly the construction of dams in the Narmada Valley. The essay questions the idea that infrastructure projects necessarily represent progress and public welfare.

Roy examines the environmental consequences of dam construction, including the destruction of forests, the alteration of river systems, the loss of agricultural land, and the displacement of communities. The transformation of rivers into reservoirs represents a significant intervention in natural ecological systems. Such projects affect not only the physical environment but also the social and economic structures of communities living in affected regions.

The essay challenges the political language of the "greater common good." This expression suggests that individual or community sacrifices are justified when they contribute to the welfare of the larger population. Roy questions this assumption by examining who actually benefits from development and who bears its costs.

The environmental consequences of large dams are not distributed equally. Urban populations, industries, and economically powerful groups may benefit from electricity, water supply, and infrastructure. However, displaced rural and tribal communities may lose their land, homes, forests, agricultural resources, and traditional livelihoods.

Roy's criticism exposes the unequal relationship between development and environmental justice. The destruction of ecological resources becomes inseparable from the dispossession of vulnerable populations. When communities are removed from their traditional environments, the consequences extend beyond economic loss. Their cultural practices, social relationships, collective memory, and identities are also affected.

The essay therefore challenges the assumption that environmental destruction is an unavoidable price of modernisation. Roy insists that development must be evaluated through its human and ecological consequences rather than through economic indicators alone.

Her representation of the Narmada Valley reveals the contradiction between the language of national progress and the experiences of people who are excluded from its benefits. The essay demonstrates that environmental degradation frequently reflects the unequal exercise of political and economic power.

7. Ecological Deterioration in *The God of Small Things*

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* presents environmental degradation through the changing landscape of Ayemenem in Kerala. The novel's natural environment is closely connected with memory, childhood, cultural identity, and the emotional experiences of its characters.

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The Meenachil River occupies an important symbolic position in the novel. Initially associated with childhood experiences, natural beauty, movement, and vitality, the river gradually becomes a representation of ecological deterioration. The transformation of the river reflects the broader changes occurring in Ayemenem under the influence of modernisation, tourism, commercial activity, and environmental neglect.

The river's polluted condition symbolises the destructive consequences of economic development that fails to recognise ecological limits. Its deterioration reflects the weakening of the relationship between human beings and the natural environment. The river is no longer presented merely as a source of life and beauty; it becomes a damaged ecological space affected by human activity.

Roy's descriptions of the river create a contrast between the remembered landscape and its present condition. This contrast suggests that environmental destruction also involves the loss of cultural and emotional relationships with nature. The degradation of the river is connected with the disappearance of a familiar environment and the transformation of local identity.

The ecological deterioration of Ayemenem also reflects the growing influence of tourism and commercial development. The natural environment becomes increasingly subject to economic interests. The transformation of landscapes into spaces for consumption reflects a broader movement toward commodification, in which nature is valued primarily for its economic utility.

The novel suggests that such transformation produces a form of ecological alienation. Human beings gradually lose their intimate relationships with natural spaces as environmental resources become incorporated into commercial and industrial systems.

The river therefore functions as a powerful symbol of environmental degradation, cultural loss, and the consequences of modern development.

8. Environmental Degradation and Social Inequality

One of the most significant aspects of Roy's environmental criticism is her connection between ecological destruction and social inequality.

In *The Greater Common Good*, the destruction of the environment is closely connected with the displacement of rural and tribal communities. The loss of land and natural resources affects people whose economic survival depends upon agriculture, forests, rivers, and local ecological systems.

In *The God of Small Things*, environmental deterioration occurs within a society shaped by caste, class, and gender inequalities. The novel demonstrates that social hierarchies influence the ways individuals experience their surroundings and exercise power over others.

The relationship between Velutha and the social structure of Ayemenem is particularly significant. His marginalised position reveals the oppressive nature of caste and class systems. Although the novel's

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environmental concerns and social inequalities are not identical, they operate within a broader framework of domination and exclusion.

Roy's representation suggests that the exploitation of nature and the exploitation of marginalised human beings share similar ideological foundations. Both involve systems that establish hierarchies, privilege dominant groups, and treat vulnerable entities as expendable.

Environmental degradation therefore becomes an ethical and political issue. It reveals the limitations of development models that prioritise economic growth while neglecting social justice and ecological sustainability.

9. The River as a Symbol of Ecological Crisis and Cultural Memory

The Meenachil River in *The God of Small Things* serves as a central symbol through which Roy explores environmental transformation and cultural memory.

The river's changing condition reflects the transformation of Ayemenem itself. Its earlier association with vitality, childhood, and natural beauty contrasts with its later polluted state. This transformation represents the consequences of modern development and environmental neglect.

The river also functions as a repository of memory. Characters' relationships with the landscape are shaped by their experiences, emotions, and histories. The deterioration of the river therefore represents the loss of a familiar world.

Roy's symbolic representation of the river challenges the idea that nature exists merely as a background to human activity. The river possesses an ecological significance that extends beyond its economic utility. Its destruction reflects the broader crisis of human relationships with the natural world.

The river also demonstrates the interdependence of ecological and social systems. Environmental degradation affects human health, livelihood, emotional well-being, and cultural identity. The loss of ecological harmony becomes a loss of social and cultural harmony as well.

10. Comparative Analysis of the Two Works

Although *The Greater Common Good* and *The God of Small Things* differ in genre and narrative structure, both works express Roy's critical understanding of environmental degradation.

The Greater Common Good presents environmental destruction through political argument and documentary criticism. It examines the material consequences of large-scale development projects, including dam construction, displacement, and the destruction of ecological resources. Its central concern is the relationship between development, state power, and environmental justice.

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The God of Small Things represents ecological deterioration through fiction, symbolism, memory, and narrative imagery. The polluted river becomes an expression of the transformation of the natural landscape and the consequences of modernisation.

The two works complement each other. The essay provides a political and economic analysis of environmental destruction, while the novel reveals its emotional, cultural, and symbolic dimensions.

In both texts, Roy challenges the assumption that development necessarily produces progress. She reveals that modernisation may involve the destruction of natural resources and the marginalisation of communities whose lives are connected with the environment.

The works also demonstrate that environmental degradation cannot be separated from social inequality. The destruction of nature and the oppression of vulnerable populations are interconnected consequences of systems that prioritise economic and political power over ecological responsibility and human dignity.

11. Major Findings

The study reveals the following major findings:

First, Roy represents environmental degradation as a consequence of unequal development and the excessive exploitation of natural resources.

Second, development projects frequently produce unequal environmental and social consequences. Their benefits may be enjoyed by powerful groups, while their costs are borne by marginalised communities.

Third, environmental destruction involves both material and cultural loss. The deterioration of rivers, forests, and landscapes disrupts livelihoods, collective memory, cultural identity, and the relationship between communities and nature.

Fourth, Roy challenges the idea that environmental destruction is an unavoidable consequence of modernisation. Her writings question development models that ignore ecological sustainability and social justice.

Fifth, environmental degradation is closely connected with caste, class, economic inequality, and political marginalisation. Ecological crisis is therefore also a crisis of justice.

Finally, Roy's literary and political writings demonstrate the importance of environmental consciousness, community rights, and sustainable development.

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12. Conclusion

Arundhati Roy's *The Greater Common Good* and *The God of Small Things* offer significant literary and political critiques of environmental degradation in postcolonial India. Through her examination of large dams, displacement, river pollution, tourism, commercial development, and social inequality, Roy reveals the destructive consequences of development policies that prioritise economic growth over ecological sustainability.

In *The Greater Common Good*, environmental degradation is associated with large-scale development projects that transform natural landscapes and displace vulnerable populations. In *The God of Small Things*, the deterioration of the Meenachil River symbolises the destruction of ecological harmony and the transformation of cultural landscapes.

The comparative analysis demonstrates that Roy treats environmental destruction as a deeply political issue. The exploitation of nature and the marginalisation of vulnerable communities are connected through structures of economic and social power. Her writings challenge dominant narratives of progress and encourage readers to reconsider the meaning of development.

Ultimately, Roy's works suggest that sustainable development must recognise the rights of communities, preserve ecological systems, and address social inequalities. Environmental protection cannot be achieved without justice, and social justice cannot be separated from the protection of the natural environment. Through literary representation and political criticism, Roy makes environmental degradation visible as a human, cultural, and ethical crisis.

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