Bulletin of Nexus
Multidisciplinary International Research Journal, Double-Blind Peer Reviewed, Open Access Journal
ISSN : 3065-7865 / Volume-2, Issue-8 August - 2025

Original Article

Ecology and Inequality: Environmental Justice in Arundhati Roy's Nonfiction writings

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Manuscript ID:
BN-2025-020810

ISSN: 3065-7865

Volume 2

Issue 8

August 2025

Pp43-45

Submitted: 12 July 2025

Revised: 21 July 2025

Accepted: 10 Aug 2025

Published: 31 Aug 2025

DOI:
10.5281/zenodo.17157486
DOI link:
https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17157486

Abstract

Arundhati Roy's nonfiction, particularly The Greater Common Good (1999) and Power Politics: The Reincarnation of Rumpelstiltskin (2001) offers a penetrating critique of the interlinked crises of ecology and inequality in contemporary India. Written at the cusp of the country's neoliberal turn, these essays interrogate how large-scale development projects and privatization policies generate ecological devastation while deepening social stratification. Drawing on the conceptual frameworks of environment justice and political ecology, Roy demonstrates how globalization, state-corporate alliances, and technocratic decision-making disproportionately displace Dalits, Adivasis, rural communities, and landless women. These populations, often excluded from compensation or rehabilitation, are compelled to bear the heaviest burden of development, while benefits accrue to the urban-industrial elite and multinational corporations. Central to Roy's critique is the exposure of the rhetoric of 'national development' and he so-called 'greater common good'. She reveals how such discourses normalize the sacrifice of vulnerable communities, treating their lives and livelihood as expendable in the pursuit of industrial growth and national prestige. By documenting the human costs of displacement, interrogating the erosion of democratic processes, and exposing the commodification of vital resources such as water and electricity, Roy reframes environmental conflicts as struggle over rights, recognition and justice. Her analysis underscores that ecological issues cannot be disentangled from caste, class, and gender hierarchies. In this sense, Roy's nonfiction exemplifies environmental justice writing, situating ecology not as an abstract concern but as a lived reality of inequality, dispossession, and resistance.

***Keywords**: Ecology, Inequality, Environmental Justice, Arundhati Roy, Development, Displacement, Neoliberalism*

Introduction:

Arundhati Roy, an internationally acclaimed writer and activist, is best known for her Booker prize-winning debut novel *The God of Small Things* (1997). While her fiction brought her literary fame, her nonfiction writings established her as one of the most fearless and uncompromising critics of state power, neoliberal globalization, and environmental injustice. Collected in volumes such as *My Seditious Heart* (2019), her essays engage with issues ranging from nuclear militarization and communal violence to development-induced displacement and privatization.

In *The Greater Common Good*, Roy examines the ecological and social consequences of India's dam-building projects, particularly the Sardar Sarovar Dam on the Narmada River. Challenging Nehru's vision of dam as the "*temples of modern India*," (Roy, 29) she argues that these megaprojects function as instruments of dispossession, creating sacrifice zones where marginalized communities are rendered expendable. Roy underscores that displacement is not incidental but structurally patterned: *Thirty-three million people. Displaced by Big dams alone in the last fifty years.* (Roy, 32), nearly half of whom belong to Dalit and Adivasi communities. For Roy, this reality is 'devastating meaningful' as it reveals how caste and class hierarchies determine who bears the costs of 'development'.

Similarly, Amita Baviskar highlights this dynamic in *In the Belly of the River* (1995), where she documents how Adivasi communities in the Narmada Valley have been disproportionately affected by dam-induced displacement,

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How to cite this article:
Tadose, K. R., & Mukherjee, S. (2025). Ecology and Inequality: Environmental Justice in Arundhati Roy's Nonfiction writings. Bulletion of Nexus, 2(8), 43–45. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17157486

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emphasizing that struggles over development are inseparable from struggles over social justice and ecological survival. By drawing attention to these perspectives, Roy situates the dam debate within a broader critique of development paradigms that reproduce inequality and environmental harm.

Roy's critique also foregrounds the democratic deficit in environmental decision-making, where engineers, financiers, and bureaucrats dominate, while the voices of the affected remain excluded. By branding resistance movement such as the Narmada Bachao Andolan as 'anti-national,' the state delegitimizes dissent and erases the agency of displaced communities. Ecologically, Roy exposes how dams exacerbate scarcity rather than alleviating it, producing salinization, waterlogging, deforestation, and even seismic instability, while submerging fertile lands and dismantling river ecosystems. She critiques the epistemic erasure in technocratic discourse that reduces rivers to units of megawatts and hectares, stripping them of cultural and ecological significance.

Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martinez-Alier reinforce this perspective in *Varieties of Environmentalism* (1997), where they argue that environmental struggles in the Global South such as the Narmada movement cannot be understood merely as conservationist but as deeply rooted in issues of livelihood, equity, and survival. Their framework of 'environmentalism of the poor' situates such resistance within broader struggles against developmentalism and ecological imperialism, providing a theoretical grounding for Roy's claim that dam-induced displacement is not just an ecological issue but also a profound question of justice.

Roy's analysis extends beyond India's borders, highlighting how international financial institutions such as the World Bank fund dam projects that perpetuate global inequalities, By revealing the complicity of transnational capital in displacements, she situates India's dam-building within a global regime of resource exploitation. Against the backdrop, call for 'the century of the small' advocates decentralized, community-driven alternatives that prioritize ecological sustainability and human dignity over state-corporate megaprojects.

One other hand, in *Power Politics*: *The Reincarnation of Rumpelstiltskin*, Roy expands her environmental justice critique to privatized energy and water infrastructures, exposing the nexus of multinational corporations, domestic elites, and neoliberal policy regimes. She portrays privatization not as a neutral economic process but as an assault on democracy itself, designed to serve the connection between the poor and political power. As she writes, "*privatization seeks to disengage politics from the market. To do that would be to blunt the very last weapon that India's poor still have their vote"* (Roy, 85)

Vandana Shiva makes a parallel critique in *Water Wars: Privatization, Pollution, and Profit* (2002), where she demonstrates how global privatization schemes transform water from a common into a commodity, dispossessing local communities of their basic right to survival. Shiva underscores that such policies disproportionately impact women, peasants, and indigenous groups, recasting ecological resources as sites of corporate profit rather than collective good. Both writers works such as Shiva's analysis of water privatization and Roy's broader attack on neoliberal infrastructures reveal how privatization simultaneously deepens inequality, undermines democracy, and reconfigures ecology as an arena of corporate control.

Her ecological critique begins with the commodification of water. At the 2000 World Water Forum, Roy observed how corporate rhetoric of 'women's empowerment' and 'participation' concealed the real agenda of marketizing water. She notes the absurdity of calling water a *'basic human right*' while simultaneously demanding it be priced at market value, warning that such policies disproportionately harm poor rural women who already shoulder the burdens of water scarcity" (Roy, 79). By invoking the Cochabamba Water War in Bolivia, where water privatization led to mass protests and violent state repression, Roy illustrates the global dimension of environmental injustice.

Roy then critique the privatization of electricity through her detailed analysis of the Enron power project in Maharashtra. She exposes the asymmetry of power purchase agreements that guaranteed exorbitant profits to corporations while imposing unsustainable costs on the state. Electricity from Enron, she notes, was *"twice as expensive as that of its nearest competitor and seven times as expensive as the cheapest electricity available in Maharashtra"* (Roy, 88). Meanwhile, *seventy percent of rural households still have no electricity*. (Roy, 90). Here, Roy connects energy infrastructure directly to structural inequality, showing how development deepens deprivation for the poor while enriching corporations.

Her broader ecological critique extends to Big Dams like the Maheshwar and Sardar Sarovar projects, which she frames as tools of state propaganda. She underscores how their construction destroys forests, submerges fertile land, and uproots millions, while their promises of irrigation and electricity remain unfulfilled. Displacement, once again, emerges as a civil war

waged against the most vulnerable, with landless communities-fishermen, boatmen, Dalits, and women-excluded from rehabilitation because they lack formal land titles.

Finally, Roy links ecological destruction to the erosion of democracy, showing how dissenting movements are criminalized as 'anti-national.' In her analysis, neoliberalism reconfigures the political, shifting decision-making into opaque arenas of contracts and corporate agreements, where public oversight is weakest. Environmental inequality thus becomes inseparable from political disenfranchisement.

Significantly, taken together, *The Greater Common Good* and *Power Politics* demonstrate how ecological devastation and social inequality are mutually constitutive under neoliberal globalization and state-corporate collusion, Roy reframes ecology as a site of justice, insisting that rivers, forests, and dams cannot be understood apart from caste, class, and gendered relations of power. Her nonfiction not only critiques the failures of development but also gestures toward alternative imaginaries rooted in decentralization, sustainability, and dignity. By blending testimony, satire, and counter-expertise, Roy positions herself within the tradition of Environmental justice writing, making visible they lived experiences of those who bear the heaviest costs of 'progresses.'

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Acknowledgement

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my research guide, Dr. Subhashree Mukherjee, Professor, Department of English, Kamla Nehru Mahavidyalaya, Nagpur, for her constant guidance, encouragement, and valuable suggestions throughout the course of this study. Her insightful feedback and academic expertise have been invaluable in shaping this work.

I am also thankful to R.T.M. Nagpur University for providing me with the academic environment and resources necessary for carrying out this research.

My heartfelt thanks go to my family and friends for their unwavering support, patience, and motivation, which have been a source of strength during this journey.

Finally, I owe special appreciation to all scholars and writers whose works have been referenced in this study. Their contributions have been instrumental in deepening my understanding of the subject

Financial support:

Nil

Conflicts of interest:

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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