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**ARUNDHATI ROY:  
ENVIRONMENT AND LITERARY ACTIVISM**

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# Arundhati Roy: Environment and Literary Activism

*Debarati Bandyopadhyay\**

*Activism is at times criticized as an aggressive and disruptive socio-cultural force. Arundhati Roy, labelled as a "writer-activist" protests against her categorization as a writer for her novel *The God of Small Things* (1997) and as an activist for her essays. She argues that her novel is as much political as her essays. She states that her idea of morality prompts her to write both fiction and non-fiction with an environmental and ethical concern. I believe that in an essay the author can present her viewpoint directly and forcefully while in fiction, it is oblique and subtle, requiring a finer critical attention. Therefore, I have analysed Roy's idea of environmental politics in her novel and the short fictional piece "The Briefing". It emerges from the discussion that due to development activities, the biotic, abiotic and human elements in a given situation, undergo degradation. However, in the novel, the possibility of a 'transgressive' yet promising realignment of nature and culture is viewed in terms of 'terrain vague', a theory used in urban planning, architecture and ecocriticism, that is considered to be relevant in view of both Roy and her female protagonist's professional training in architecture. Through the subversive narrative strategies and images of environmental decay, Roy, as an activist, continues to warn her readers against the ecocidal tendencies of humankind.*

## Literary Activism and Environmental Politics

In "The Ladies Have Feelings, So...", an essay in the *Algebra of Infinite Justice* (2002), Arundhati Roy had asked: "What is the role of writers and artists in society: Do they have a definable role? Can it be fixed...? Should it be?" (190) The question that arises, as a corollary to these, is: should a writer or artist be branded as a literary activist if he/she engages directly and emphatically with one or more polemical and controversial issue(s) and continues to write

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about it/them, as has been done in the case of Roy herself? In order to describe literary activism, Adair Jones had cited the case of Arundhati Roy: "Her first and only novel, *The God of Small Things*, won the Man Booker Prize in 1997, which brought her instant international fame. She traded on this in the best of ways, donating time, money and attention on the issues at the heart of her novel..." In other words, she turned into an activist fighting, through her writing, for many good causes. But even before this, she had had to learn the necessity of activism from her own experience with the novel. Jones tells us that "before all the accolades and prizes, Roy was charged with obscenity in India, which made her aware of the real value of literature: the right to speak freely." She faced imprisonment, yet returned to India, fought to clear her name and succeeded. She had, presumably, learnt a lot about the relationship between one's writing and the society. But, as Jones points out, for Roy, "the real fight had only begun. To have her novel associated with obscenity took attention away from the issues she was hoping to bring to light and, consequently, incited Roy to deeper, more meaningful activism."

Activism postulates the existence, in an individual, of a high level of awareness of, and a burning desire to fight for, an issue or an instance of perceived injustice. In the literary world, if an author consistently engages with contemporary issues and advocates a certain point of view, then, for instance, like Arundhati Roy in India and Tim Winton in Australia, the literary figure is called a writer-activist, generally. However, it is not that such an author usually is, or is expected to be, formally, an expert in a given field of social, economic, political, cultural or environmental studies in the contemporary period. Rather, it is the high visibility and public standing that enables an established literary figure to articulate the ideas inherent in a cause of activism, in a memorable way. Quoting Eva Sallis who had written that "[a] writer is neither exactly private nor exactly expert", Jones comments on "the unique relationship between art and engagement" and opines, therefore, that "[w]hat a writer brings to an issue, however, is an ability to represent, to communicate effectively and emotionally, to convince."

In *Literary Activists* (2009), Brigid Rooney had raised a number of pertinent questions about the origin, nature, purpose and extent of influence of literary activism: "Critics and commentators rarely seem

cognisant... of the conditions under which literary writers intervene or act in public life. What motivates writers to function as public intellectuals? How do writers' public interventions impact on their careers and reputations? How should we interpret their representations, and their writings, in this light?" (xxii) Out of one's keen awareness of certain wrongs in the surroundings, when an author intervenes actively to bring about a change in the wide arena of public or national life, the writing inevitably begins to look like literary activism. Rooney points out, equally pertinently again, however, that "[l]iterary works are themselves, of course, just one of the many components of the nation's 'public life'" (xxii). Yet, it is in the nature of literary works that the impact of their message or subject often has far-reaching consequences for the author, and more significantly, for the gigantic audience or the 'public' that, unlike the author, lives, out of the glare of 'public life'. This is significant especially in the case of those public figures like Arundhati Roy, I believe, whose works are highly controversial. Rooney wrote that "[s]ome... works are not just adjuncts to or mirrors of an author's public intervention, but *constitute* an author's public intervention. Literary works have catalysed extensive, sometimes bitter public debate..." (xxix). In Roy's case, too, her writing is not just adjunct to, but rather, it constitutes her kind of, activism. Following Rooney's description of certain authors in a different (Australian) context, I am inspired to discuss Arundhati Roy's works as of one who has "drawn on ... [her] public engagements and activism creatively, feeding these experiences back into... [her] writing in new and challenging ways" (xxiii). But the opposite viewpoint is also important: Ramchandra Guha has, like many others later, criticized Roy's literary activism. In an article, "The Arun Shourie of the Left," in *The Hindu* in 2000, Guha had written: "I am told that Arundhati Roy has written a very good novel. Perhaps she should begin another. Her retreat from activism would - to use a term from economics - be a 'Pareto optimum': good for literature, and good for the Indian environmental movement."

It is precisely the phenomenon of literary activism and its pejorative connotations that Roy questions with reference to her own writings. In "The Ladies Have Feelings, So...", she asked: "Why am I called a 'writer-activist' and why ... does that make me flinch?" (196) She herself tells us that it is because "after writing *The God of Small*

*Things* I wrote three political essays" but then, evoking the right of authors to write in any mode or form that one chooses, she raises a counter-argument that creates a framework for my discussion.

Roy wrote:

Now, I've been wondering why it should be that the person who wrote *The God of Small Things* is called a writer, and the person who wrote the political essays is called an activist? True, *The God of Small Things* is a work of fiction, but it's no less political than any of my essays. True the essays are works of non-fiction, but since when did writers forgo the right to write non-fiction? ("Ladies" *Algebra* 196)

According to Roy, since she chooses to write both fiction and non-fiction to represent a specific "position" or "point of view" (197) that she believes in, she is burdened with "this double-barrelled appellation" (196) of being a writer-activist. But to her, the whole point is that the two cannot be separated. In fact, she writes clearly that a meaningful act of writing is synonymous with socially responsible activism to her:

There is an intricate web of morality, rigour and responsibility that art, that writing itself, imposes on a writer... And that's not always easy. It doesn't always lead to compliments and standing ovations. It can lead you to the strangest, wildest places.... The trouble is that once you see it, you can't unsee it. And once you have seen it, keeping quiet, saying nothing, becomes as political as an act as speaking out. There's no innocence. Either way, you're accountable. ("Ladies" *Algebra* 191-3)

When Roy writes that an author is accountable for every act related to her decision to write about a particular situation in a particular way, she is telling us that a writer, according to her, has a significant role to play in a given society, economy, political state and culture. In this capacity, Roy writes to instil knowledge and fear in her audience; she tries to warn so that it creates a possibility of collective awareness and action which might yet help in survival and sustenance of life, both at the global and local level. (May I add that this is probably why she has written so much and for so long a period against nuclear tests and weapons and the destruction of

the lives and livelihood of millions of villagers subsisting on and with the ecology of the Narmada valley?) In other words, she is an activist writing for a positive change in the state of affairs that can effect an improvement in our environment, physical as well as human societal. Arundhati Roy is unabashedly political in her writings for the sustenance of the environment.

Subsequent to the publication of *The God of Small Things* in 1997, Roy had published *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* (2001), *An Ordinary Person's Guide to the Empire* (2005) and *Listening to Grasshoppers: Field Notes on Democracy* (2009). In each of these, she had criticized both global and national political and economic policies and the mode of implementation of government decisions in terms of, again, both short-term and long-term impact on the population and the environment. I believe that an instance from one of her essays would prove that her politics has always been on behalf of the poor, mostly illiterate victims of environmental disasters created by gigantic financial institutions and State policies. She wrote about the impact of the Sardar Sarovar Dam on the lives of the villagers facing eviction from the valley in these terms in the ironically-titled essay, "The Greater Common Good":

All over the world there is a movement growing against Big Dams. In the first world, they're being decommissioned, blown up.... They're a Government's way of accumulating authority (deciding who will get how much water and who will grow what where). They're a guaranteed way of taking a farmer's wisdom away from him. They're a brazen means of taking water, land and irrigation away from the poor and gifting it to the rich. Ecologically too, they're in the doghouse. They lay the earth to waste. They cause floods, waterlogging, salinity, they spread disease. There is mounting evidence that links Big Dams to earthquakes. (*Algebra* 57-58)

It has been widely considered by critics and socio-political commentators that Roy's essays about these issues are political in nature, but her remark that *The God of Small Things* is no less political has not been given adequate attention except by Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee in *Postcolonial Environments: Nature, Culture and the Contemporary Indian Novel in English* (2010). I, too, shall discuss the environmental politics in the novel. In order to do this, I shall

quote extensively from the novel as well as Mukherjee's work to analyse the possibility of viewing Roy's work from a perspective which is somewhat different from that of *Postcolonial Environments*.

Literature (less consciously activist or politically coloured often and sometimes more so, as in the case of Arundhati Roy whose literary work deliberately incorporates politics and activism) pertaining to the environment is extremely important in the society and culture of the contemporary period. It is also my belief that any conscious act, performed for the sake of ushering in a change in perception of the government and the people, regarding the condition of the environment, can take two possible paths for expressing itself: one is manifestly critical (though the expression of this in writing can be of various degrees of intensity, penetration and vehemence), and the other suggests constructive ideas to improve the situation. In literature, it is easier to comprehend, write about and come across both critical and constructive ideas in non-fictional prose pieces or essays. Though the same ideas often remain embedded in fictional works, they are expressed much more tacitly and subtly and therefore require extensive exploration and analysis.

### **The God of Small Things**

I shall, therefore, look into the two fictional works of Roy and read them closely. One is of course her novel, *The God of Small Things*, but the other is a little known piece called "The Briefing" published in a collection of her shorter works called *Listening to Grasshoppers: Field Notes on Democracy*. I shall analyse them in some detail, often with extensive quotations, to bring out Roy's idea of politics regarding the environment. These are texts which, when subjected to a rigorous ecocritical reading, yield significant result, ecocriticism being the study of the literary response to environmental crisis. In other words, ecocriticism studies literary works to search for traces and ways of relating the state of environment and ecology or nature with that of culture. But in order to comprehend the nature and scope of the literary representation of the ramifications of environmental and ecological degradation and destruction in both human and non-human life at the local, national and global levels, ecocritics had had to correlate with it, interdisciplinary research in history, human geography, economics, politics, sociology as well as health and allied bio-scientific disciplines. As a result, it becomes important to follow what the author of *Postcolonial Environments*

writes : "material strata, one that is composed of soil, water, plants crops, animals (both domestic and wild)" , "at one level, historical, political and economic matters" , and "[t]he complex (and often conflict-ridden) web, field, or system - whatever we choose to call it - composed of the relationships between human and non-human agents or actors that define the history of the Indian subcontinent is what I understand as 'environment'" (5). In other words, he states that he understands 'environment' "as an integrated network of human and non-human agents acting historically" (5). I am further tempted to follow his basic argument about Roy's environmental concern, presented in "The River and the Dance: Arundhati Roy", a chapter in *Postcolonial Environments* where it is stated that "a full engagement with the politics of Roy's novel needs to understand the symbiosis between environment, history and culture.... Arundhati Roy's literary style, form and subject ...are deeply-considered artistic responses to the historically specific condition of uneven development in India, a condition that cannot be understood as long as we understand environment as a separate category to those of history and culture" (83).

With Mukherjee's definition in mind, and yet to move beyond the scope of his argument limited to a postcolonial materialistic view of the environment or setting of the novel at the town of Ayemenem in Kerala, and to establish an alternative reading of the text from an ecocritical perspective that highlights less-known, but extremely significant aspects of the discipline, as in the theory of 'terrain vague', I shall begin at a point in *The God of Small Things* where Chacko - Rahel and Estha's Oxford-educated Rhodes-scholar uncle - lectures them on history.

Then, to give Estha and Rahel a sense of historical perspective....he told them about the Earth Woman. He made them imagine that the earth - four thousand six hundred million years old - was a forty-six year old woman .... It had taken the whole of Earth Woman's life for the earth to become what it was. For the oceans to part. For the mountains to rise. The Earth Woman was eleven years old, Chacko said, when the first single-celled organisms appeared. The first animals, creatures like worms and jelly- fish, appeared only when she was forty. She was over forty-five - just eight months ago - when dinosaurs roamed the earth.

'The whole of human civilization as we know it,' Chacko told the twins, 'began only two hours ago in the Earth Woman's life. As long as it takes us to drive from Ayemenem to Cochin.'

It was an awe-inspiring and humbling thought, Chacko said... that the whole of contemporary history, the World Wars, the War of Dreams, the Man on the Moon, science, literature, philosophy, the pursuit of knowledge - was no more than a blink in of the Earth Woman's eye....

'And ... everything we are and ever will be - are just a twinkle in her eye,' Chacko said grandly.... (53-54)

Chacko's lecture is suited to be intelligible to children. But the essential point is that given the late arrival and monopolization of the Earth by human beings, a lesson in humility towards her and all the living and non-living existence that she supports, would be necessary.<sup>1</sup> In this historical context (chronologically speaking, in the broadest sense), if we begin to view the role played by the fictional characters in *The God of Small Things*, then quite a few instances of environmental degradation due to the phenomenon of uneven development emerge. But even before that, right at the beginning of the novel, we seem to come across a world where nature and culture have remained integrated enough for years to perpetuate a stable, abiding and harmonious environment:

...by early June the south-west monsoon breaks and there are three months of wind and water with short spells of sharp, glittering sunshine that thrilled children snatch to play with. The countryside turns an immodest green. Boundaries blur as tapioca fences take root and bloom. Brick walls turn moss green, Pepper vines snake up electric poles. Wild creepers burst through laterite banks and spill across the flooded roads. Boats ply in the bazaars. And small fish appear in the...PWD potholes on the highways. (1)

The visible effects of development activities seem to merge with nature. There is, apparently, no lack of harmony between nature and culture. But in this novel, the beginning is actually the end because these opening lines signify the last phase of the narration in terms of chronology. This is the time when Rahel comes back

from America to Estha, her twin brother, 23 years after they had been separated at about the age of 8 years. If we begin to trace the story of environment and ecology from the narrative telling us about life in Ayemenem in the twins' childhood and reach the chronological end at the time of their reunion, then a significant trajectory of history in this regard will have been covered.

*The God of Small Things* is a novel about the time when Ammu, daughter of Ayemenem House in Kerala, goes to Calcutta, marries a gentleman working in a tea-garden, gives birth to the twins but has to return to her parents with the babies when her husband proposes to hand her over to his 'white' boss to save his job. It is a story of Ammu's defiance of patriarchal convention twice: once in marrying a man not chosen by her parents and next, in seeking love and solace from Velutha, a low-caste neighbour and employee at Ayemenem, after her return and during her struggle to survive with the children as a single female parent without any right over ancestral property. The consequences are profoundly tragic. The accidental death of Ammu's young niece is called a murder and Velutha is wrongly accused and has to pay for his socially and sexually transgressive relationship with her by dying in police custody, after Estha, Ammu's son and Velutha's loyal follower is duped into identifying him as the culprit. Ammu too, is insulted, traumatised and made to die a lonely death. Her children are separated and socially ostracized. While Estha goes mute, the other, the girl, turns into a brittle kind of a person and even when they reunite in pain and love at the end of 23 years, the question of an incestuous relationship is considered as controversial in critical parlance and this makes the condition of their existence seem less excruciatingly agonized than it really is.

In the novel, there are many significant instances of social, familial, sexual, religious as well as class and caste-based politics. However, it is the politics pertaining to the individual in a position of disadvantage vis-à-vis the State which proclaims to undertake development activities for all but more often than not marginalizes a section of the same society and degrades the environment in various ways that is of particular interest to me here. Roy deliberately creates the picture of such a benevolent State as perceived by the children early in the novel. So much so, that they seem to equate it with a Godlike omnipotence and munificence: "According to Estha,

if they'd been born on the bus, they'd have got free bus rides for the rest of their lives.... They also believed that if they were killed on a zebra crossing the Government would pay for their funerals"(4). In the face of such trust in the goodness of the State, in prophetic thought that foreshadows what really happens to small, insignificant creatures or the 'small things' of the title of the novel (in a State undergoing the process of development and oblivious to their small world), their mother Ammu feels afraid for Rahel and Estha and their future: "To Ammu her twins seemed like a pair of small bewildered frogs ...lolloping arm in arm down a highway full of hurtling traffic. Entirely oblivious of what trucks can do to frogs" (43). Roy's choice of image reminds us of the insuperable distance (and potential danger due to their massively different dimensions) that exists between the truck roaring by, indicating commercial activities (made possible due to the existence of the road, indicative of development) and the tiny, insignificant creatures, evocative of the idea of both subaltern and natural modes of existence. It could be thought of as prophetic also in the sense of much of Roy's perception of, and activism to stall the danger of State-sponsored acts of development for the insignificant, inarticulate citizens who are affected by them as in the case of the Narmada Bachao Andolan.

However, if we begin our analysis of the novel itself with "a skyblue day in December sixty-nine (the nineteen silent)...when...[a] skyblue Plymouth...sped past young rice-fields and old rubber trees, on its way to Cochin" (35) then the comparatively clear environment of Kerala in a bygone era is evoked. But there are still two elements to disturb this picture of serenity. The first comes from the reference to 'old rubber trees', thereby reminding us of the old colonial days when natural and human resources in India were held to be equally easy to exploit. The second disturbing idea comes a sentence later: "Further east, in a small country with similar landscape (jungles, rivers, rice-fields, communists), enough bombs were being dropped to cover all of it in six inches of steel" (35). Even though officially this was the postcolonial era, in this country being carpet-bombed there is every attempt on the part of the invading super power to destroy life and natural environment and ecology completely and irreversibly in a new phase of imperialist exploitation and aggression. Sandwiched between the global and the historical, Roy's fictional Ayemenem, even in 1969, is a place where natural environment

and human culture strike a discordant note mostly, anticipating and revealing a malaise that surfaces especially when there is an attempt to move forward at a furious pace, breaking off with tradition (as would become evident especially after Rahel and Estha's return to the place more than two decades later). In order to show how human beings arrive at this juncture, I will juxtapose two scenes from these early days.

First we shall look at Baby Kochamma's garden and then, contrast it with Velutha's environment.

...Baby Kochamma [had] returned from Rochester [in America] with a diploma in Ornamental gardening.... [H]er father gave Baby Kochamma charge of the front garden of the Ayemenem House....

Baby Kochamma turned it into a lush maze of dwarf hedges, rocks, and gargoyles. The flower she loved most was the anthurium.... Their single succulent spathes ranged from shades of mottled black to blood red .... In the centre of Baby Kochamma's garden, surrounded by beds of canna and phlox, a marble cherub peed an endless silver arc into a shallow pool in which a single blue lotus bloomed. At each corner of the pool lolled a pink plaster-of-Paris gnome with rosy cheeks and a peaked red cap.

...Like a lion-tamer she tamed twisting vines and nurtured bristling cacti. She limited bonsai plants and pampered rare orchids. She waged war on the weather. She tried to grow edelweiss and chinese guava. (26-27)

Baby Kochamma's carefully cultivated garden (with the word 'cultivated' intended to remind us of 'culture') is a riot of colours and cultures. Bonsai plants prove the existence of an extreme instance of 'culture' or the kind of power that man exercises to control the natural world completely. And in the aggressively red anthurium juxtaposed with the single, oriental-looking blue lotus, there is a deliberate clash of cultures and natural environments belonging to different countries and origins and this is also evident in her attempt to bring edelweiss and chinese guava together in her garden. However, in the name of ornamentation, it is Baby Kochamma's peeing cherub, highly prominent in the proximity of pink rosy-cheeked

gnomes and gargoyles that shocks us into a realization of many foreign elements competing for attention in the 'cultured' environment created by her and resulting in a hideous distortion of the simply natural environment that would have been beautiful enough with rudimentary care. Aesthetically speaking, the ornamental garden appears to represent a state of existence where both natural and cultural environments have been undergoing corruption.

If money, lack of fulfillment in marriage in private life due to strictly observed religious and patriarchal rules and an acquired American diploma can induce Baby Kochamma to corrupt nature, then the opposite picture is presented in the situation where young Velutha, a son of the soil, a *Paravan* or untouchable person, fosters nature and a natural way of living and also provides crucial service, taking care of the aesthetic environment of Ayemenem by means of carpentry and by tending to machines. Against the expensive foreign diploma of Baby Kochamma, we read of Velutha, "eleven then ... like a little magician. He could make intricate toys - tiny windmills, rattles, minute jewel boxes out of dried palm reeds; he could carve perfect boats out of tapioca stems and figurines on cashew nuts." (74) With training from Johann Klein, a visiting expert carpenter from Bavaria, Velutha in his adolescence "had finished high school and was an accomplished carpenter... [with] a distinctly German design sensibility.... Apart from his carpentry skills, Velutha had a way with machines. Mammachi ... often said that if only he hadn't been a Paravan, he might have become an engineer. He mended radios, clocks, water-pumps. He looked after the plumbing and all the electrical gadgets in the house"(75). So much so, that when Baby Kochamma's "garden cherub's silver arc dried up inexplicably, it was Dr. Velutha who fixed its bladder for her", along with making angle's wings, cardboard clouds, an easily dismantled manger "for Christ to be born in" for her "annual Nativity plays" (75). In other words, Velutha, an untouchable, belonging to the class diametrically opposite Baby Kochamma's, succeeds in bringing together the best knowledge of tradition and modernity to improve the environment at Ayemenem. "When Mammachi decided to enclose the back verandah, it was Velutha who designed and built the sliding-folding door that later became all the rage in Ayemenem" (75). I feel that as in Velutha's life and work, so in this act of crafting the sliding door, what emerges as significant to our discussion is the creation

of a means of easy passage, back to nature, from the life of culture, and vice versa.

Viewed through the frankly evaluating eyes of young Rahel and Estha, Velutha appeared to be a special person because of his 'green' knowledge, or his ability to shape their world in keeping with the natural environment: "They would ... wonder how he always seemed to know what smooth shapes waited inside the wood for him. They loved the way wood, in Velutha's hands, seemed to soften and become as pliable as plasticine. He was teaching them to use a planer"(78-79). Velutha was not only, merely by himself, living in harmony with nature even as he continued to work confidently in the Machine Age and follow its cultural parameters; at the same time, through Rahel and Estha, he was also planting in the next generation the values that made such an integrated mode of life possible. The way in which Roy describes the twins' eagerness to learn these things from him, even though it means an act of rebellion against the restrictions imposed, in the name of class, caste and culture, by their own family, makes it evident that the interest is mutually shared. It is also a form of comment on the artificiality of life at Ayemenem House, a reflection of which had already been seen in Baby Kochamma's garden: "They were forbidden from visiting his house, but they did. They would sit with him for hours, on their haunches - hunched punctuation marks in a pool of wood shavings.... It was Velutha who made Rahel her luckiest ever fishing rod and taught her and Estha to fish"(78-79). The children also feel at home, even in the impoverished, disease-ridden hut of Velutha: "His house (on a good day) smelled of fresh good shavings and the sun. Of red fish curry cooked with black tamarind. The best fish curry, according to Estha, in the whole world"(79). In other words, Velutha's "little laterite hut, downriver from the Ayemenem House" (78) is a near-perfect instance of eco-conscious living or living in constant touch with one's natural environment in stark contrast to the grand design, money and colonial mentality represented in the *anglophile* culture of the big house. Mukherjee in *Postcolonial Environments* compared the 'big' houses of Ayemenem with Velutha's hut:

The location of the Ayemenem House also speaks of the continuities between old and new colonialisms. Like the History House, it is supported by lands and rubber

plantations purchased during the nineteenth century which contributed to the economy of British colonialism.... In the new world of post-independence India, it houses Chacko's picklefactory (wrested and expanded from Mammachi's more modest local enterprise) which seeks to be a small part of the national effort to integrate the country into a globalized economy. The logo of paradise Pickles and by extension, that of Ayemenem house, is now a crudely painted *Kathakali* dancer with the legend 'emperors of the realm of taste' emblazoned beside it. Its products represent the commodification of exotic regional flavours for international markets....

In contrast, Roy gives us a glimpse of a 'small house' that speaks of a distinct environment and a habitation that opposes the politics of 'largeness'.... Velutha's hut speaks of and enables practices of integration, inclusion and equity. Next to the river and hemmed in by a huddle of trees, 'it nestled close to the ground, as though it was listening to a whispered subterranean secret'.... (96)

Living in and with nature, Velutha comes to represent a certain kind of power that remains unappreciated by the typically snobbish majority of adult inhabitants of Ayemenem House. Impervious as they are to the idea of Velutha's adherence to the tradition of a way of life that is almost ritualistic in its proximity to and practice of nature-oriented work, or the heritage of an ecocentric life and broadly egalitarian values, his rise, aptitude with machines, and ability to assimilate elements of native and foreign aesthetics and culture, had appeared to threaten their own position of authority in so many ways. If, like his half-blind father Vellya Paapen and his paralysed brother Kuttappen, Velutha had remained a part of the natural and background life of Ayemenem, eternally thankful for bare subsistence provided to such people of a 'culture of habitat'<sup>2</sup> by the masters living off their labour, then he too, would have been acceptable. But Velutha does not remain silent or eternally grateful like his father. He protests. He asserts his right to live like a proper human being in his own natural habitat of choice<sup>3</sup>, and participates in a Communist procession. When on that crucial day in 1969 the family was going to Cochin in their car and was held up at a level-crossing, a procession of communists had jeered Baby Kochamma for being



a "Modalali Mariakutty... Modalali in Malayalam means landlord" (80) and since the child Rahel had felt that one of these communists in the procession had been Velutha (though he had not belonged to the group that had come near the car), "[i]n the days that followed, Baby Kochamma focused all her fury at her public humiliation on Velutha.... In her mind he grew to represent the march... she began to hate him"(82). What was earlier revealed through the difference in their attitude towards their respective natural and cultural environments, is now fostered by distinctions of class, caste and politics and therefore, when Velutha is known to have "polluted" the environment of Ayemenem through Ammu who had fallen in love with this 'untouchable' man, Baby Kochamma orchestrates the situation that leads to, first Velutha's and subsequently, the broken-spirited, broken-hearted Ammu's death and Estha's banishment and muteness. Familial, sexual, class and community - based politics are complemented in Roy's novel with politics based on the rights of those working closest to the land for generations and the abrogation of it by the "Cardmom Kings, Coffee Counts and Rubber Barons" (69) in postcolonial India, the class that by upbringing, Baby Kochamma represented.

Velutha's death puts an end to any possibility of the coming together of the upper (equipped with modern machines) and lower, local (those who live, work and die hugging the land and nature) classes of people and the fostering of anything but a grossly commercialized, degraded environment. It is as a result of this kind of a coming to an end of one part of the history emerging in Ayemenem that when we flash forward to 1991, the story of the environment emerges in an aggravated condition. Mukherjee in *Postcolonial Environments* blames the process of globalization firmly for this state of both environmental and cultural degradation by pointing out that

with Estha and Rahel's return in 1991, we are ushered into the next stage of Kerala and India's development in the era of the post-Fordist global capitalism often crudely known as 'globalization' (as if this had not always been the tendency of historical capital over the past five or six hundred years). Within and outside India, the neo-liberal mantra endlessly circulated without much critical analysis presents this as a kind of utopian border-crossing available to all the citizens of the world who sign up to its

prescription of 'structural adjustments' and the corporatization of economic and political process. Roy's novel punctures this myth by showing it to be a continuation of the despoliation and degradation of the Indian environment and peoples that had accelerated under colonialism and has now taken on an unprecedented velocity. (98-99)

To Mukherjee then, the environmental degradation of Ayemenem in 1991 is a direct result of the process of global capitalism and I think that in Roy's novel this is proved by various situations of foreign economic and cultural domination that are projected prominently. For instance, in 1991, when the silent Estha goes on long walks along the local Meenachal river (reminding us of the meaning of 'meen' as fish in Indian culture and in this sense, signifying that the river is the natural habitat of fish), this is what greets his senses: "Some days he walked along the banks of the river that smelled of... pesticides bought with World Bank loans. Most of the fish had died. The ones that survived suffered from fin-rot and had broken out in boils" (13). In the highly sarcastic naming of a chapter as 'God's Own Country', Roy gives us another view of Ayemenem in 1991, this time seen through Rahel's eyes: "Years later, when Rahel returned to the river, it greeted her with a ghostly skull's smile.... Downriver, a saltwater barrage had been built, in exchange for votes from the influential paddy-farmer lobby.... More rice, for the price of a river"(124). As a result, the river had turned into "a swollen drain"(124). The poor and dispossessed had made a slum by its side, adding to the pollution. While upstream, "clean mothers washed clothes and pots in unadulterated factory effluents" and "people bathed", downstream at Ayemenem, slum- "children hung their bottoms over the edge and defecated directly onto the squelchy, sucking mud of the exposed river bed" and the net result would be that " on warm days the smell of shit lifted off the air and hovered over Ayemenem like a hat" and naturally, even the History House transformed into a luxury hotel was not exempt from either the stench or the "thick and toxic" water(125). In a really concise manner, Roy points out how both farming and factories pollute nature and also hinted at the unholy nexus between the globalization, greed and lack of far-sight in post-colonial India. And added to this was pollution of the cultural environment: the hotel, called 'Heritage',

"had bought" "smaller, older, wooden houses -ancestral homes... from old families and transplanted" them "around the History House in attitudes of deference" (126). The "oldest of the wooden houses... had been the ancestral home of Comrade E.M. S. Namboodiripad.... The furniture and knick-knacks that came with the house were on display... with edifying placards..."(126). So much for 'heritage'. We learn soon that "Comrade Namboodiripad's house functioned as the hotel's dining room, where semi-suntanned tourists in bathing suits sipped coconut water (served in the shell)..."(126). Commodification of both nature and culture, it seems, is complete.<sup>4</sup> This was 'God's Own Country' (according to the highly ironical allusion to the way Kerala is promoted in the tourism sector by the State in real life and in Roy's fictional work, by the hotel administration "in their brochures" 125), with a polluted, stinking environment, already sold in an abridged version (like the Kathakali dance-performances) to the foreign visitors. It is this state of environmental decay that Rahel and Estha return to and Mukherjee wholeheartedly criticizes. However, what is usually not noted is that Roy probably had no intention to project the West as merely the source of or cause behind cultural and environmental pollution in a Third world economy. It is better to remember for the sake of a balanced argument that she shows how Rahel's husband McCaslin had come to India to conduct research on the tradition of energy efficiency in vernacular architecture (18). Roy probably intended to show that there are elements in our culture and tradition that have remained eco-friendly and worthy of appreciation even in 'developed' countries. Still, the picture of Ayemenem in 1991 is an indication of the terrible consequences of a certain kind of 'development' in our country.

But my reading of Roy's novel intends to move beyond this palpable sign and even cause of environmental degradation here. I had mentioned earlier that it is possible to engage with a particular situation in two ways: first, by being critical only and second, by searching for or suggesting ways of redemption and rectification, possibly leading to a different and better future. For the possibility of finding the latter in Roy's work, I return to two scenes that take place after Rahel's return to Ayemenem. The first is a description of Baby Kochamma's garden in 1991.

Recently, after enduring more than half a century of relentless, pernickety attention, the ornamental garden

had been abandoned.... The reason for this sudden, unceremonious dumping was a new love. Baby Kochamma had installed a dish antenna on the roof of Ayemenem House... in Ayemenem... now whole wars, famines, picturesque massacres and Bill Clinton could be summoned up like servants. (27)

Though there can be a debate around the concept of famines, massacres and Bill Clinton being switched on and off with the help of anything like a TV remote by an obscure Indian woman, in contrast to the more likely economic and cultural subjugation that she unknowingly undergoes in a putative real life, what is to be noted is the way in which Roy presents this phase of history: "...while her ornamental garden wilted and died, Baby Kochamma followed" baseball, cricket, tennis, *The Bold and the Beautiful* and *Santa Barbara* (27). In other words, the cultured gardening is replaced with another system of culture absorbed via the artificial visual and auditory environment generated by means of American soaps and league games. It is a way of life that a satellite-dependent global technological culture helps to transmit literally everywhere, including Ayemenem. It seems as if all Baby Kochamma has succeeded in doing is to replace the corruption of the natural environment in her garden earlier with the pollution of the cultural space that she inhabits in 1991. But what happens to Baby Kochamma's garden after it was abandoned and more importantly, why does Roy devote half-a-page to the description of it in 1991? One ostensible purpose could be to show how culture is relative and how the ornamental gardening of the 1960s and the satellite TV of the 1990s could generate equally artificial environments so as to create between them, at least at some conceptual level, some parity. But I think the description points towards a regeneration of nature after the prolonged torture that it had been subject to in the name of culture:

Recently, after enduring more than half a century of relentless, pernickety attention, the ornamental garden had been abandoned. Left to its own devices, it had grown knotted and wild, like a circus whose animals had forgotten their tricks. The weed that people call communist patcha (because it flourished in Kerala like communism) smothered the more exotic plants. Only the vines kept growing, like toe-nails on a corpse. They reached through

the nostrils of the pink plaster gnomes and blossomed in their hollow heads, giving them an expression half surprised, half sneeze-coming. (27)

Roy's language - half playful, half scathingly sarcastic - is directed towards the hideous occupants of the garden and the uncanny reference to vines continuing to grow like dead-men's toe-nails, I believe, is meant to reveal the way in which nature can stage a comeback and destroy the artifices of culture that had corrupted the natural environment for long. In fact, in the same period as Roy was writing *The God of Small Things*, in a nice coincidence, Ignasi de Sola-Morales Rubio was generating a theory of an open ground, an urban or semi-urban space used heavily and subsequently abandoned that then facilitates the return of nature, in his idea of 'terrain vague'. He had celebrated the sheer vacancy of such a place: "The French term *terrain* connotes... the physical idea of a portion of land in its potentially exploitable state but already possessing some definition to which we are external.... *Vague* descends from *vacuus*, giving us 'vacant' and 'vacuum' in English." Terrain vague, then, signifies an empty space but it is replete with possibilities of a fate that might be significantly different from the earlier one, for that particular place. As we learn from the idea of 'terrain vague,' "[t]he relationship between the absence of use, of activity, and the sense of freedom, of expectancy, is fundamental to understanding the evocative potential of the city's terrains vagues." Read in terms of this idea of terrain vague, the garden in Roy's novel emerges, like Rahel and Estha's life subsequent to their meeting in 1991, as an empty space, no doubt, but, as at last potentially free from the corruption effected by artifice and culture, a place full of "promise, the space of the possible, of expectation." If we think of the earlier state of the garden tended by Baby Kochamma as an expression of Roy's critical stance, in terms of ecocritical analysis, then read along the lines of Sola-Morales's terrain vague, the description of it in the fictional context in 1991, I feel, hints at the possibility of something constructive, a positive change in terms of the situation that suggests a balance of power between nature and culture.

In the other instance of Roy's subtle treatment of the nature-culture equation, we re-read the description of vines climbing up telegraph poles and fish swimming in the rain-drenched, waterlogged potholes

on PWD-made roads on the opening page of Roy's novel. As stated earlier, this is the phase that comes, chronologically, at the end of the sequence charting the story of Rahel and Estha. Mukherjee in *Postcolonial Environments* reads these lines in terms of "borders and border-crossings (some licensed and others transgressive)" (93). He goes on to write:

This confused space, where the 'natural' and the 'cultural' run into one other, provides the precise environment and an interpretative handle for a reading of Rahel and her memories.... Like Ayemenem in the rain, Rahel's consciousness is premised on the dissolution of all narrative boundaries and separations. More than that, it is the particular environment of Ayemenem that enables this.... (93).

Mukherjee then reads the novel's opening in terms of how it "prepares us to read the other 'small' people of the novel Estha, Ammu, Velutha - as having this in common with Rahel; that they are all compelled to cross normative boundaries within the specific environment of Kerala in the late 1960s and suffer, to varying degrees, grievous losses for it" (93).

In other words, Mukherjee reads the opening of the novel with an added emphasis on the 'culture' or that part of the environment that has man at the centre as agent (however 'small') and in possession of consciousness. In such a reading, 'nature' is seen, during the monsoon, to 'transgress' into the space (manmade road, poles etc.) reserved for human culture apparently. But given the 'historical perspective' offered by Chacko (whose lesson of humility he did not choose to remember but may be, Roy's readers do), it could also be read the other way round, i.e., in terms of an accentuated attention to nature. In this, I follow Gil Doron's definition of "landscapes of transgression" as representing a positive and nature-oriented alternative to the negative sense of transgression in terms of culture. Gil Doron specifies "landscapes of transgression" as derelict sites where "nature has started to reconstruct the built or (now) 'ruined' environment" (255). The short-lived poles and roads (signs of human effort, development and culture) that seem to compete with the everlasting elements of nature, gradually tend to merge with them to present a picture of a harmonious co-existence

of nature and culture. In the idea of terrain vague which, I feel, is as much applicable to this urban road-space in Roy's novel as Baby Kochamma's garden, Sola-Morales had stated: "A second meaning superimposed on the French *vague* derives from the Latin *vagus*... in the sense of 'indeterminate, imprecise, blurred, uncertain'... this absence of limit precisely contains the expectations of mobility, vagrant roving, free time, liberty." It is the idea of indeterminacy coupled with liberty that opens up the narrative and interpretative space required to appreciate the description of fish swimming on the manmade roads.

Given the fact that Roy is trained as an architect and so, too, in the novel, is Rahel, an awareness of the concepts of urban architecture commensurate with town planning in terms of optimum utilization of urban space and openness is to be expected in this context and it is also plausible that a reflection of ideas of both critical and constructive nature might find their way into her novel. If we remember Luc Levesque's view of the concept of terrain vague as an interstitial space, it becomes plausible to read Roy's Ayemenem in the fictional setting of 1991 as representing an interstitial space and period that holds in balance ruin and the prospect of regeneration: "it is also possible to approach the interstitial condition of the 'terrain vague' as an urban resurgence of the wild." He goes on to make a synopsis of the range of meaning this term signifies:

At the confluence of modern brutality (industrial infrastructure, dominance of roads and highways, real estate tabula rasa, etc.), ruderal colonization (flora and fauna), and urbanity... urban wilderness confronts us with raw environments that embody the troubling contradictions that societies tend to repress.... They are remnants that speak... of... violence and irresponsibility... but also of the adventurous, tenacious forms of life that emerge, strengthened, by these hostile environments.

In other words, in the disfigurement of the natural space in Baby Kochamma's garden, we can see the history of violence and irresponsibility mentioned by Levesque. In contrast, after its abandonment by her we find life-forms asserting a hold on the land with tenacity and renewed vigour. *The God of Small Things* has naturally and often been read as a tale of friction and conflict between

different ideas of culture and the transgression of some of these. But it also seems logical to hold the view that instead of sensationalizing transgression, just as possibly, it becomes a saga of a crossing of the boundary between different ideas of culture(s) leading to a harmonious whole - as in the coming together of Rahel and Estha at the end, so in the (even if momentary, seasonal and precariously poised) fact of renewal of life and co-existence of nature and culture.

In order to move from the discussion of the nature and scope of the politics of environment, in both natural and cultural connotation, in *The God of Small Things* to that of the shorter fictional piece "The Briefing" (2008) we have to take into account the extent of Roy's growth and evolution as an environmental activist in the intervening decade. The necessity to articulate and work consciously towards a better environment had been incorporated into the critique of environmental politics in her novel, no doubt. However, a novel that does not openly declare itself as propagandist and polemical has limited scope to communicate and publicize any particular kind of activism, environmental or otherwise. In *The God of Small Things*, therefore, I would argue, Roy had subtly and consistently introduced images that suggested a particular orientation in environmental politics, but it has been easier for her and the effect has been more conspicuous when she wrote about the maladjusted nature of development activities in the environmental context in the frankly-avowed activist essays that came in the decade following the publication of the novel. I believe that in her essays, as a 'literary activist', Roy was representing a particular idea of environmental and human degradation as a result of development policies, as described, in a different context, by the noted ecofeminist Maria Mies in *Search for a New Vision*:

'The view from below and from inside' (our subjectivity, feelings, empathy etc.) helps... to get rid of the myth, that development means a linear, evolutionary process. This is what usually is understood by development. Some have already reached the top: western industrialized societies, men, city dwellers, the middle class. Others are striving to reach the same level: the 'underdeveloped' societies, women, rural people, the working class or

generally the lower classes. 'Development' means factually 'catching up with those on the top.'

... There cannot be unlimited growth in a limited world.... Only some can pursue this linear progress without end at the expense of others, who then face regression. There cannot be industrialization without ecological destruction.(146)

Whether expressed directly or not, Roy's fictional and non-fictional work, taken together, comprise a critique of development policies and the resulting condition in environment and ecology (not just in nature but also within the human society) in our times.

The subject of Roy's concern (environmental politics and human life) has remained fairly constant over the decades. A special combination of this concern and her method of literary representation has distinguished Roy as a very powerful writer-activist. Quoting extensively from Roy in "Free Speech: Your Take" and "The Perils of Privatized Power: Enron, the World Bank, and the ECAs" in that order, Jane Chapman has noted the significance of her stance:

Roy's skills as a fictional author have enabled her to produce a reflexive, personalized style of journalistic writing which invites the reader to share in her process of discovery: an approach that encourages support for activism. According to Roy, the activist label derives from the fact that she takes sides in her essays: "I have a point of view. What's worse, I make it clear that I think it's right and moral to take that position and what's even worse, use everything in my power to flagrantly solicit support for that position"... whilst acknowledging that this approach "skates uncomfortably close to the territory occupied by political party ideologues", she differentiates her approach thus: "when I tell a story, I tell it not as an ideologue who wants to pit one absolute ideology against another, but as a story teller who wants to share her way of seeing."

I believe that it is in the iteration of the fact that she always writes "as a story teller", even in the context of her essays, that the continuity between Roy the novelist, the essayist and the author of

the short fictional piece "The Briefing" exists in the context of her environmental activism.

### "The Briefing"

"The Briefing" was written for and first published in the seventh edition of *Manifesta*, an European biennial on contemporary art in 2008. It was a part of the 'Projected Scenarios' section, based on and located in a fort called Fortezza, built in the Alps in 1833. It had never actually been attacked, though built to be impregnable. In Roy's projected scenario for the fort, it is ironically geared to withstand attack of every kind but the one that will eventually destroy it as well as mankind - by the kind of pollution of the natural environment and cultural space that is inescapable today. Roy has avowedly written an allegory. It is centred apparently around the intriguing concept of the possible vulnerability of a fort that has never been attacked. But actually, it points towards the condition of the environment at present and anticipates a worse situation in the future. In "The Briefing" a disembodied voice briefs the putative audience about an unspecified mission and in the course of it we read of the projected effects of global warming.

The voice tantalizes the senses of the audience with questions and suggestions. It speculates about the barrenness of the cultural environment there and mentions that the makers and keepers of the fort had displayed eagerness "to store everything that ought to be defended at all costs" (204). Now the whole question is about what needs to be defended most. The reader is left free to feel puzzled over the possible choices. It could be riches, art and culture, or even the overarching idea of civilization and what not: "Weapons. Gold. Civilization itself. Or so the guide book says" (205). But whatever it might have guarded, it becomes clear that it could not have permitted the chance incursion of beauty "uninvited" "like sunlight stealing through a chink in the curtains" (203). Then the apparently innocent but really momentous question arises: "Does this mean its forbidding walls have thwarted even Beauty and sent it on its way?" (203).<sup>5</sup> The voice further states that though during the present "time of peace and plenty", the fort "is being used to showcase civilization's highest aspiration: Art", it immediately suggests that art is not being mentioned as something beautiful or as a manifestation of culture and tradition, but rather for the barren

commercial value: "These days, I'm told, Art is Gold" (205). The voice next suggests that there is gold hidden inside the fort and discusses how everyone has been looking for it. However, it is the reason behind a desperate search for gold that points towards the real problem in the world: "Their urgency must be palpable to you. They know there's gold in the Fort. They also know there's no snow on the mountains. They want the gold to buy some snow"(205). The equation between gold or purchasing-power and snow looks odd at first glance, but in keeping with the real-life, worsening environmental situation in the present world, it actually represents an extreme condition of environmental damage.

In "The Briefing" we learn about the 'Snow Wars' and their background. Though this is still a part of Roy's creation, the immediacy of the description makes it palpably familiar, especially as we continue to feel the effects of global warming, pollution of soil, water and air, scarcity of drinking water and legal as well as physical battles over these and other natural resources, in many parts of the world. The voice describes the "texture and fabric" of the place under discussion in this context: "Since the winters have grown warmer here, there are fewer 'snowmaking' days and as a result there's not enough snow to cover the ski-slopes. ... Every one degree Celsius increase in winter temperatures spells doom for almost one hundred ski-resorts. That...is a lot of jobs and money"(205-206). Since Fortezza is located in the Alps, the projected lack of snow there is intended to display one of the most dangerous consequences of global warming. But when the issue of commercialization of every aspect of nature and culture is added to this projected scenario, a murky picture emerges. The greed to control and exploit completely everything in nature might well continue to fuel the competition for such supremacy unto the end. The voice in Roy's work refers to a certain "Guenther Holzhausen, CEO of MountainWhite, a new branded snow product... Hot Snow (because it can be manufactured at two or three degrees Celsius above the normal temperature)"(206). This businessman is quoted by the 'Voice': "The changing climate is a great opportunity for the Alps. The extremely high temperatures and rising sea levels brought about by global warming will be bad for seaside tourism. Ten years from now people usually headed for the Mediterranean will be coming to the comparatively cooler Alps for skiing holidays" (206).

What is to be noted is that the precarious state of the environment and its extremely serious consequences in terms of submergence of low-lying land and cancerous exposure to the combined effect of pollution and sunlight are elided over rather neatly. And yet Roy's dexterous handling of the rhetoric actually reminds us of her indignation over this silent part or the ruthless commercial exploitation of natural resources resulting in complete destruction of environment and ecology of a place and dispossession and eviction of those who live closest to it. It also reminds us of her need to turn to activism for a number of environmental (as in the case of India's Greatest Planned Environmental Disaster centred around the Narmada valley) and human rights issues in India and abroad. The glib rhetoric of tourists choosing the Alps when seaside resorts are no longer safe, actually holds the implicit attempt to remind us of what Roy had written to arouse our collective conscience in a 100-pages-long essay called "The Greater Common Good" in *The Algebra for Infinite Justice*: "We take care not to dig too deep. We don't really want to know the grisly details.... We don't seem to know that the resources we're feasting on are finite and rapidly depleting"(70). And in a terrible indictment of the lack of our concern for anything but the foolishly selfish and exploitative, she had written about such activities, especially when endorsed by the State and funded by big multinational companies as good business opportunity, as "emblems that mark a point in time when human intelligence has outstripped its own instinct for survival. They're ... malignant indications of a civilization turning upon itself. They represent the severing of the link, ... the understanding - between human beings and the planet they live on" (136-37).

If we consider Roy's open and direct criticism of both the State and the policies of multinational companies ruining the environment as acts of literary activism proper, then I would argue that in the imaginary setting and timeframe of her fictional works like "the Briefing", in her creation of the rhetoric that implies (but does not issue statements directly) the same criticism of this nexus, she remains the same activist fighting against the same forces, albeit on a different literary register. In an interview taken after the publication of "The Briefing" by *Outlook*, called "And a Fleece That's as White as Snow", this short piece is described as "an allegory", "a powerful fable about Climate Change, the War on Terror and

Corporate Raj." We also learn that "The Fort That Has Never Been Attacked is capitalism itself." In the interview, in answer to the question "How do two kinds of writing - fiction and non-fiction - challenge you, as a writer, in different ways?" Roy said, "The non-fiction is wrenched out of me - it is a more immediate and more direct response to what's going on around us.... It's about using language as a weapon. In fiction, language is, or should be, a wand. Fiction is more subversive...."

In "The Briefing" we read not of a direct attack on consumerism and capitalism, but of how there is a Snow war between two multinational companies headed by two brothers aiming to capture the same segments of the global market with their products, abusing nature and man in similar ways. Guenther Holzhausen's company produces MountainWhite snow, which, "like most artificial snows, is made from a protein located in the membrane of a bacterium.... What sets it apart from other snows is that in order to prevent the spread of disease and other pathogenic hazards, MountainWhite guarantees that the water it uses to generate snow for skiing is... sourced directly from drinking water networks" (206). Guenther's brother Peter Holzhausen's company, Scent n' Sparkle, "[i]n addition to all the advantages of Mountain White... promises whiter, brighter snow ...in three aromas, Vanilla, pine and Evergreen... to satisfy tourists' nostalgic yearning for old-fashioned holidays...[that] anticipates the effects that the global migration of trees and forests will have on the tourism industry" (207). In other words, instead of offering hard-hitting facts and figures as in the essays written by the activist, Roy here allegorically presents the extent of abuse of a basic life-sustaining natural resource like drinking water for business. She also refers to the story of forest-migration, apparently impossible, as Macbeth had thought wrongly, to criticize the effect of global warming on the flora and fauna in every part of the world. "Tropical palms are moving up into the lower Alps. Evergreens are climbing to higher altitudes in search of a colder climate. On the ski slopes, under the damp carpets of Hot Snow, in the warm, fertilizer-coated soil, stowaway seeds of new hothouse plants are germinating...." We also learn: "When the trees migrate, birds and insects, wasps, bees, butterflies, bats and other pollinators will have to move with them.... Alaskan caribou plagued by mosquitoes are moving to higher altitudes where they don't have enough food to

eat. Mosquitoes carrying malaria are sweeping through the Lower Alps" (207).

In the interview, Roy had said that "The Briefing" was "an allegory about things that have taken me years to understand". I feel that her practical engagement with the river, water and nuclear contamination problems for years as an activist had given her the ability to handle these environmental issues in a subtle manner in the allegory. The relationship between her concern as an environmental activist and this allegory becomes absolutely clear when we read in "The Briefing": "The Snow wars have spread to the plains. MountainWhite now dominates the snow market in Dubai and Saudi Arabia. It is lobbying in India and China, with some success, for dam construction projects dedicated entirely to snow cannons for all-season ski-resorts" (208). When asked in the interview about why she had chosen to respond to the "enigma of a fortress that has never been attacked with a fable" in this way, Roy said, "At the time I was writing it, a friend of mine who practices ecological restoration told me... how ski resorts have started manufacturing artificial snow. I began to research it - and the story of the Snow Wars emerged.... Capitalism's answer to climate change - buy more, sell more, fool everybody for a little while longer. It seems to be the answer to everything...."<sup>6</sup>

Roy's most scathing attack on Capitalistic attempts at exploitation of the natural resources and the resulting destruction of environment, ecology and human lives comes towards the end of "The Briefing" when she relates how Scent n' Sparkle controls "a company that makes - as well as defuses - landmines. Perhaps their new batch will be scented... in order to attract animals and birds as well as children.... [It] also retails mass-market... prosthetic limbs... for Central Asia and Africa" (209). The critique of such a nefarious connection between water-depletion, battles, scented landmines and business with prosthetic limbs is an imaginative, accentuated expression of Roy's indignation. And the circuit is completed when we learn that Scent n' Sparkle "has put in a tender for the dredging and cleaning of lakes and rivers in Austria and Italy that have ... grown toxic from the residue of fertilizer and artificial snowmelt" (209).

A projection of the environmental and ecological future of the earth is the subject of Roy's allegory. It presents a dismal picture of our

future. Yet, it is something that cannot be ignored as it is well grounded in the present global condition of a rapidly accelerating pace of environmental decay that Roy has scathingly denounced as an activist on so many memorable occasions. However, the conceivably reserved and much-qualified positive note on which her novel might be said to have ended with its stress on (as I perceive it) an expectancy of renewal of life and regeneration of nature over the ruined state of the environment, finds, after all these years of strident environmental activism, an open declaration even within the allegorical framework of "The Briefing". Where once Roy had asked pathetically about what the aftermath of a nuclear holocaust might be (quoted in Note 1 below), here, she writes: "The Fort that has never been attacked has laid siege to itself.... When the stone lion's stone bones have been interred in this, our wounded, poisoned earth, when the Fort That Has Never Been Attacked has been reduced to rubble and when the dust from the rubble has settled, who knows, perhaps it will snow again" (210).

Arundhati Roy, not having published another novel since 1997, is famous now as a writer-activist. She uses her celebrity status to augment the environmental cause that she fights for. It is because she is a celebrity as a literary activist that she had been invited by the Manifesta-authorities to write "The Briefing." And the urge that she feels to combine her activities as an activist with her literary output has been, described best by herself exactly a decade ago in her interview with N. Ram in *Frontline* in January 2001: "I'm a celebrity because I'm a writer, not the other way round.... There are...two voices virtually at war within me - one that wants me to dive underground and work on another book, another that refuses to let me look away, that drags me deep into the heart of what's going on around me.... A writer writes... it's a calling. One does it because one must." The result of the combination of Roy's unrelenting distress, about issues related to environment and human rights as an activist, with her burning desire to write about them, is a distinctive brand of literary activism that is intended to make all of us, as consumers of the earth, more conscientious.

## Notes

- 1 In order to analyse the idea of why it is necessary for Roy to write about the historical perspective, especially with regard to the role

human beings play in the environment and ecology that we are a part of, I shall here juxtapose Chacko's idea of human civilization as a blink in the Earth Woman's eye with Roy's essay, "The End of Imagination", about the Pokhran Blast in May 1998, where she writes about the environmental consequences of such activities to project a terrifying view of the future of the earth :

If there is a nuclear war, our foes will not be China or America or even each other. Our foe will be the earth herself. The very elements - the sky, the air, the land, the wind and water - will all turn against us. Their wrath will be terrible.

Our cities and forests, our fields and villages will burn.... Rivers will turn to poison.... There will be no day.... Nuclear winter will set in.... Radioactive fallout will seep through the earth and contaminate groundwater. Most living things...will die. Only rats and cockroaches will breed and multiply and compete with foraging relict humans for what little food there is.

What shall we do then, those of us who are still alive? Burned and blind and bald and ill, carrying the cancerous carcasses of our children in our arms, where shall we go? (*Algebra* 5-6)

History and projected history come together in Roy's imagination to reveal the state of the human culture that seeks actually to destroy mankind along with the terrestrial environment in the name of controlling or even, ironically, improving it.

- 2 In *Cultures of Habitat: On Nature, Culture, and Story* (1997), Gary Paul Nabhan had written about his "interest in human communities that have a long history of interaction with one particular kind of terrain and its wildlife" (2-3). While Raymond Dasmann had preferred to call such communities 'ecosystem people', Nabhan had sought to bridge the gap between the ecosystem and human culture in his formulation of the concept of "cultures of habitat" to discuss the local place and ecology-based lives of traditional societies. In our discussion of the ethics of living in a place and working towards the preservation of its natural distinctions Nabhan's ideas have proved to be essential. After citing Dasmann's 'ecosystem people', he wrote: "The term *ecosystem* comes from the scientific tradition of identifying discrete but somewhat arbitrary units of the natural world as though each functioned like an organic machine. In contrast, the term *habitat* is etymologically related to *habit*, *inhabit*, and *habitable*" (3). I feel that it is to a large extent true of the scientific discipline that it thinks



of an area in terms of its ecosystem which is often like a distinct unit, though within the natural world. Nabhan's idea of 'cultures of habitat', in contrast, seems to have the advantage of combining the sense of a place, living there and the necessary human attempt to keep it habitable for all, thereby pointing towards both an ecology and an eco-ethical way of living in a place. This idea is accentuated by Nabhan's description of the term "*culture* [that] may likewise be preferable to the value-neutral *people*; *culture* implies that we learn from our elders and neighbors a way of living in a place that is more refined or better adapted than our genes alone can offer" (4). In view of this observation, when we learn that Nabhan had, as he says, with the help of David Hancocks, realized that "where human populations had stayed in the same place for the greatest duration, fewer plants and animals had become endangered species; in parts of the country where massive in-migrations and exoduses were taking place, more had become endangered" (2), it signifies that if there is a longstanding culture of living and loving a place then it is possible that it helps both man and all other life to coexist and flourish there. And the relationship between this culture of eco-ethical living in a place and literature and art finds succinct expression in Nabhan's observation that a "stable human community may have both generic and orally transmitted cultural adaptations to place that often escape the eye" (4).

- 3 Later, in an essay (overtly bearing the stamp of activism, called), "Come September", in *An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire* (2005), Roy puts the question of the rights of the people living and working closest to the land in a different context: "The theme of much of what I write, in fiction as well as non-fiction, is the relationship between power and powerlessness and the endless, circular conflict they've engaged in"(13). Simply speaking, if anything is imposed from above and outside, there is resistance from within the people, and further acts of coercion then turn the resisting population into something that is perceived as 'terrorists' by the State. A vicious cycle of state crackdown and 'terrorist' retaliation perpetuates a state of fear for all. In "Come September", Roy wrote:

In a country like India, the 'structural adjustment' end of the corporate globalization project is ripping through people's lives. 'Development' projects, massive privatization, and labour 'reforms' are pushing people off their lands and out of their jobs, resulting in a kind of barbaric dispossession that has few parallels in history.... Civil unrest has begun to erupt in the global village. (39-40)

- 4 A section of Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee's chapter on Roy's novel reads 'Ayemenem and Ayamenem'. It is intended to show how fiction in the novel actually has a firm basis in the real world of Ayamenem "reputed to be the inspiration for Roy's Ayemenem in the novel" (91). He quotes extensively from R. Krishnakumar's 1997 report in *Frontline* to show how there is a "Taj Garden Retreat at Kumarakom" and also that the Taj Group has made the house built in 1877 the centre-piece of the huge tourism complex and "sought Heritage Status" for it (91). Mukherjee then quotes Krishnakumar to highlight the fact that "Nearby is another private tourism venture which has transplanted about 100 ancestral homes from many parts of the State" (91).

It appears that corporate control of the cultural environment in this way had directly motivated Roy to collate stories about the 'heritage' hotel industry at Ayamenem and use them in her novel.

- 5 I am not aware of the fact whether Roy has read Tagore's *Red Oleanders (Raktakarabi)* lately or ever at all (though I would like to imagine that she has, given the Narmada Bachao activists' reputed reference to Tagore's *Muktadhara* or *The Waterfall* in public speeches), but readers who have read both the authors are immediately reminded of how the Professor in the Yaksha Town of Tagore's play had compared the beauty of Nandini, the force of positive ecological and environmental change, with the sudden gleam of sunlight in a place forever darkened.
- 6 In the Cornucopian theory, this is precisely the idea that is propagated about Capitalism's role in climate and environment change-induced problems. Wherever there is increased exploitation of natural resources leading to depletion and pollution, Capitalism or its theoretical avatar in the idea of Cornucopia (or the proverbial horn of plenty) argues and lobbies in favour of a further increase in such consumption, so that science, technology and administration can find immediate and urgent impetus to find alternative modes of production and continuation of the same facilities. We find a detailed discussion of the Cornucopian theory and the counter-arguments offered by Deep Ecologists, Environmentalists, Ecofeminists and Marxist ecocritical thinkers in Greg Garrard's *Ecocriticism*.

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