

## Ecofeminism and the Intersection of Women and Nature in Arundhati Roy's The Ministry of Utmost Happiness

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### Abstract

In order to investigate topics pertaining to nature, ecofeminism aims to challenge feminism. Additionally, it considers the environment to be a feminist problem. The word "ecofeminism," which was first used by Francoise D'Eaubonne in 1974, refers to the relationship between the exploitation and dominance of nature and the exploitation and dominance of women in patriarchal societies. Through their writings and activities, ecofeminists, authors, and activists have worked to uplift women and support environmental conservation and upkeep. Prior to ecocriticism becoming a recognized academic discipline in Western civilization, India had a history of women-led environmental activism and movements, such as the Chipko Movement in Uttarakhand and the Bishnois in Rajasthan.

The well-known ecofeminist author of Indian English literature, Arundhati Roy, grows more alarmed at the abuse of women and the environment. In order to illustrate the intricacies of the link between nature and women, this essay will analyze Arundhati Roy's most recent book, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, which exhibits a non-anthropocentric view of nature. It also draws attention to the predicament of transgender women, oppressed women, and revolutionary women, as well as their contributions to exposing the exploitative practices of a patriarchal culture where men hold a privileged position. As a result of unethical modernization, rehabilitation, and scientific technology, the author reveals the destruction of ancient birds and animals. In order to change the gendered issues that have been developed to silence women and other non-human life, this article will use an ecofeminist lens to explore how nature might be loved.

**Keywords:** ecofeminism, the ministry of utmost happiness, intersection of women and nature, environmental activism, patriarchy, transgender women, social justice

### Introduction

Ecofeminism extends the study of environmental and feminist ideologies as well as literature and the arts. Its main concerns are how to address environmental deterioration and women's situation in patriarchal societies. Ecofeminism could hardly have stayed unaffected by literature, which is renowned for reflecting on current topics. Numerous Indian novelists examine the psychological, biological, and social surroundings of women in addition to their subjugation. The way Indian women

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have conducted their lives throughout history provides a substantial understanding of their predicament. When it came to environmental production, men and women had distinct roles. Women were portrayed as domestic, moral, pure, gentle, kind, simple, and attractive, whereas males were viewed as industrial, logical, independent, and haughty. This was a difference in how men and women were perceived in relation to nature. Humans are not associated with nature in any way. It is impossible to ignore the presence of Indian women novelists like Arundhati Roy in English literature, who have gained respect through victories such as the Sydney Peace Prize in 2004, the Lannan Cultural Freedom Award in 2002, and the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2006. Roy demonstrates her deep concern for the environment and human rights by her involvement in the Narmada Bachao Andolan, her support for Kashmiri independence, and her worries about the consequences of nuclear testing. She supported Maoist insurgency organizations in 2011 by writing *Walking with the Comrades*. In 1997, during the golden jubilee year of Indian independence, Roy rose to international prominence with the release of her first book, *The God of Small Things*, which went on to become the best-selling book and win the Man Booker Prize for Fiction. Her first book in twenty years, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, came out in 2017. She tackles the equally complex link between nature, gender, and memory in her fiction, which is frequently praised for its multifaceted, intricate narrative structure.

Through flashbacks, Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* spans multiple narrative levels from ancient antiquity to the present. In light of ecofeminism, my comprehensive goal in this paper is to make Roy's significant mission tangible. It explores a number of environmental and feminist challenges. This essay aims to bring together all of the broken tales from an ecofeminist standpoint and explain how women and other marginalized characters fight for happiness and make it through a patriarchal culture where ecological survival is of the least importance.

#### **Objectives:**

- To look into *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*'s manifestations of ecofeminism.
- To investigate the ways in which Arundhati Roy's narratives reflect and even challenge the discourse and theory surrounding ecofeminist viewpoints.

#### **Research Approach**

The link between women and the natural world is examined by contemporary ecofeminist thought, especially in light of their interdependencies. Additionally, as a means of overcoming the current state of environmental and societal deterioration, it examines their ability to foster the desired connection. I have employed the explanatory research method in my study. The purpose of this study is to explore Arundhati Roy's view that women and nature are equally vital to societal harmony and peace.

#### **India's Ecofeminist Revolution**

Environmental activism and movements have a long history in countries like Africa, South Asia, and

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especially India. This is before ecocriticism became a popular academic ideology in Western civilization. Third World women are now using activism to increase awareness of the value of nature as an essential component of human existence. The Chipko movement (1973) and the Bishnois movement (1981) have gained a traditional status and are currently regarded as effective instances of environmental activism in India. In India, these movements are referred to as ecofeminist. Women's confidence is bolstered by these movements, which also equip them to fight against injustice. Francoise D'Eaubonne first used the word "ecofeminism" in 1974 to describe the relationship between the exploitation and dominance of nature and the exploitation and domination of women. This implies that ecofeminism is a feminist paradigm that actively incorporates ecological insights. By including the dominance of nature, it expands the scope of feminism.

### **Background Theory**

It is crucial to clarify the theoretical framework of ecofeminism, a literary theory that holds that women and nature are united by a common past of oppression by a callous patriarchal society, before delving deeper into the textual explanation. But only recently have authors been aware of the danger that the ongoing abuse of our environment brings to humanity, as well as the issues of women and the environment.

Whereas ecocriticism examines the connection between literature and the environment, feminism is the movement that promotes women's rights. According to Estok, ecofeminism and ecocriticism are distinct from one another. They "complement each other and [work] toward defining more fully what each approach envisions" (Estok). When humans violate the rights of other elements of nature, it immediately leads to ecological disaster. Accordingly, Estok contends that "nature is the central category of analysis in ecofeminism" (Estok). A patriarchal lifestyle is a part of feminism, but ecofeminism contends that patriarchy controls both women and the environment. "[...] the hatred of nature and the hatred of women are intimately connected and mutually reinforcing," he adds (Estok). He acknowledges the relationship between the subjugation of animal and human nature.

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

"Men's thinking parallels their right to exploit nature and their exploitation of women," claims Ariel Salleh. [Salleh]. Salleh connects the subjugation of women by men to the abuse of nature. Men can be seen hunting, killing animals for their own consumption, and destroying the environment to make way for factories and other things. However, women who are conscious of environmental issues and the preservation of nature have been able to significantly improve the environment in specific ways,

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such as waste management, energy efficiency, and water conservation at home. The relationship between women and the natural world is revealed by this perspective, which originates not only from the conceptual realm of women's biological ties to nature but also from its role as a source of life.

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

Roy examines environmental deterioration, women's struggles, and their interactions with the external side world in the book. She has portrayed a number of broken narratives centered on various characters, a number of self- and societal issues, and the plight of natural environments as well as women who have been denied for years access to education, equal rights, employment, and personal freedom.

Roy talks about Anjum, a transwoman who is one of the so-called "others" in society and a "dual being" who oscillates between hope and despair. Individuals who identify as the opposite of their biological sex and whose behavior deviates from stereotypical gender norms are known as transgender people. Many of the characters Roy works with have complicated gender histories. Roy reveals the social systems of normalcy and otherness through the self-discovery of his main character, Anjum, who was born Aftab with partial female sex organs in addition to male ones. Anjum's mother, Jahanara Begum, is confused because she expected a son, but her father, Mulaqat Ali, was less than thrilled with the birth of a hermaphrodite. Mulaqat Ali attempts to change Anjum's biological sex organ into a male organ, which is against nature. He muses that the family would be ashamed of this change. He felt that a person who is seen by most as a conventional man ought to behave as such. "He decided to cut all connections with his son," he said. He didn't know Anjum. They would occasionally glance at one another when passing each other on the street, but they would never say hello (Roy 25).

Traditional values, orthodoxy, social circles, and societal expectations continue to play a major part in shaping an individual's identity in India's patriarchal society. Furthermore, ideas like honor and disgrace are essential to all frames of reference and social duties to uphold the honor of the family, which includes gender performance.

"You tell me where do old birds go to die?" Roy asks the Imam in the prologue of the book, which describes Anjum's state as she is being torn to pieces by the antagonistic social forces. Do they descend from the sky like stones? In the streets, do we trip over their bodies? Do you not believe that the All-Seeing, All-Powerful being who created us has made the necessary preparations to remove us from this world? (Roy 5,

This implies that elderly birds are typically shunned by society, just like elderly people. These individuals are typically discarded from the realm of pleasure. Anjum, who has never been accepted by society, is equally disregarded. She is expressing her worry over the death of ancient birds (Delhi's vultures), which are the result of a new drug called diclofenac that was put into the environment to increase the amount of milk that cows produce.

Roy mockingly berates humanity while Delhi overindulges in ice cream: "Not many noticed the

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passing of the friendly old birds" (Roy), since people had so much to look forward to.

The graveyard, which undoubtedly becomes Anjum's home following her departure from Khwabgah, is where the narrative starts and concludes. In order to escape the laws imposed by others, Roy used a cemetery to depict a different universe in which the living and the dead mingle. The cemetery serves as a place of comfort for her, reflecting the connection between the two. Graveyards are used to dispose of remains, and Anjum, who has endured physical hardships all of her life, finds peace in her paradise, the haven of the highest bliss.

Animals are exploited in the construction of contemporary society and are viewed as nothing more than machinery. Hunting has always been viewed as a male pastime and an ethical discourse, fostering adventure and sport in the sake of experiencing nature. As hunting evolved into an ethical activity, it became necessary to justify the slaughter of animals for experience. These days, using live animals in lab settings, causing them to deteriorate and eventually die, is justified as a noble endeavor. As he tortures these creatures in the name of discovery, Roy remarks on the folly of humanity. In a pharmaceutical testing lab, she talks about "a beagle who had either escaped from or outlived his purpose." Because of the medications that were tested on him, he appeared worn out and rubbed out, like a sketch that someone had attempted to erase (82).

Under the guise of hybridity or scientific progress, these animals endure unspeakable cruelty at the hands of avaricious humans. In her guest house, Anjum, who is shown as a gatherer, loves the roving dog, Biroo. She "poured some tea." He noisily slurped it up. It was awful for his body but great for his soul since he drank everything Anjum drank and ate everything she ate (Roy 83). "More than a theory of feminism and environmentalism or women and nature, as the name might imply, ecofeminism approaches the problems of environmental degradation and social justice from the premise that how we treat nature and how we treat each other are inseparably linked," according to Greta Gaard in her article "Women, Water, and Energy: An Ecofeminist Approach" (Gaard 158).

Through Anjum's transformation of the cemetery into the bright, colorful guest house Jannat—a paradise—Roy exemplifies ecofeminist ideals. Her sanctuary includes Saddam Hussain's marriage, Tilo's school, and Zainab's small zoo—"a Noah's Ark of injured animals." She has imagined a paradise that is the antithesis of the Garden of Eden, one where experience and permanence—rather than innocence—are what define Anjum's existence. Roy reiterates the indignation of nature. We try to change their evolution with the aid of science and take use of these spirits for our own gain. She also takes issue with society's attempts to change people and the environment to suit its own needs. People who take advantage of other oppressed groups for their own demands and greed view Anjum's sexuality and ecological being as nothing more than objects.

Another significant character, S. Tilottama (Tilo), is a modern woman whose dark beauty Roy portrays. Her disinterest in marrying Naga led to her suffering and shame, which made matters worse when Naga, who preferred to smack his wife Tilo, did as his friend suggested: "What she needs, I'm sorry to say, is two tight slaps." Your contemporary strategy isn't always effective. We are all creatures

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at the end of the day. We must be shown where we belong (Roy 232). The advice given to Nagaraj, an Intelligence Bureau employee, by his friend to slap his wife suggests that your education and experience are pointless even if you are unable to rationalize your feelings and are so emotionally invested in someone that justice is subordinated.

When Tilo notices the horrible existence of zoo animals, where the officials are merely feigning concern for their well-being, Roy takes on the role of the animals in Delhi Zoological Park. She predicts the predicament of the hippo, swimming in a filthy pond, being tortured by tourists for their amusement, and the gibbon, living in a tree because of its trash prison. When Tilo makes fun of a bunch of rowdy men, Roy implies the importance of morality through her: "congratulated them for the courage it must require to feed a caged hippo razor blades" (235). They began teasing her with derogatory names because they couldn't stand the insult: "Oye! Hapshie madam! "Hey! Nigger Madam!" because of her shaded skin.

We are able to oppress women and non-human creatures through the words we use and the way we communicate. Without acknowledging that we are also animals, we use the term "animals" to excuse the exploitation of other species. According to Joan Dunayer, "We feel entitled to dominate them, just as we have done to marginalized human groups, because we perceive them as inferior" (11). They referred to her as "Nigger" and "Hapshie," which is Abyssinian in Hindi. When a lady is called such, it means that she is ugly or repulsive. As a result, all Abyssinians fall under the umbrella of being "ugly." The majority of derogatory terms used to characterize women are adjectives that are associated with domestic animals, such as bitch, bull, cat, cow, and so forth. In addition to rationalizing their mistreatment and separating people from non-human animals, these sentiments are also used to oppress women and other underprivileged groups.

Anthropocentrism and modernism, which have left no room for non-human species to exist in harmony, are harshly criticized by the author. She describes how "a cow that had died—burst—from eating too many plastic bags at the main garbage dump" occurred at Hauz Khas, South Delhi (264). The land and resources have been taken by the city's crowded lifestyle and disease-ridden climate, leaving little but plastic for lower species to consume.

Roy takes issue with contemporary development strategies that have left non-human species with no chance of surviving in the toxic environment. One such incident occurs when Tilo observes two bulls that "appear quite normal, but at night they grow tall..."—a unique scientific phenomenon. They raise their legs like dogs when they urinate. Are they canines or bulls? or wolves? (298). She noticed how the cows had changed as a result of the scientific testing done on them. She also looks at the way the chickens are injected "to increase the efficiency of egg production" (299) in the poultry sector. The novel describes factory farming, which largely degrades the environment and oppresses native species, and the hazardous chemicals that are tested on laboratory animals to determine their lethality. With its evil and careless methods of use, unethical modernity is killing the globe. "These dangerous chemicals are frequently first tested on laboratory animals to determine levels of toxicity;

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this practice, together with the enormous environmental costs of factory farming and meat-eating, demonstrate the linkages between environmental degradation and the oppression of nonhuman animals (speciesism)," according to Greta Gaard, who criticizes such advancements. Gaard (5).

The book explores contemporary individuals who are conflicted by social expectations. Roy represents a woman's position in the society indicated above, which holds that women are vulnerable to violence and can be shaped as such. Rigid gender roles dictate that husbands should be active and dominant and women should be docile. For women, becoming a mother and getting married are important status positions. The exploitative tendencies of the patriarchal society, where men dominate, have been shown through the husband-wife relationship, demonstrating that men are still animals who have not yet developed. Women still have to make concessions for the sake of family unity, even after rebelling against their exploitation.

Maryam Ipe, Tilo's mother, remains single and devotes her life to the school, which is renowned for its cutting-edge teaching strategies. The stories covered a variety of topics across a number of years, including her school, its instructional strategies, and its stunning site; others focused on the social and environmental initiatives she spearheaded or the honors she received (239). In the book, she is portrayed as a legendary feminist who fights to live in a culture that is traditional. Because she had an affair with a "Paraya," the family left her and consigned her to an orphanage till the birth of her child. The same society that harassed her came to admire her when she remained single and defeated all of the bullies. She turned become a role model for women who want to achieve their goals. Roy critiques the patriarchal culture in which a woman is compelled to leave behind her unmarried child. She disapproves of a culture that only permits married people to become mothers. Patriarchal society does not accept single, unmarried mothers. Married women who are infertile are favored over single women, even in artificial reproductive procedures. It reveals society's bigotry. In relation to the aforementioned circumstances, this condition demonstrates male dominance and subtly conveys the conventional notion of femininity. According to Roy, the societal perception of parenthood has completely shifted as a result of unmarried mothers and gays who support children.

She discusses the various ways that the affluent class takes advantage of Adivasis. Revathy, often known as Comrade Masse, turns into a Maoist after being greatly impressed by Marx and Lenin. She uses contemporary technologies to depict the barrenness of their fertile country. The plight of oppressed classes is identical, even though Adivasi women are the most disadvantaged and exploited group in our nation. By maintaining the resources, these women contribute to the revolutionary movements and the tribe's promising future. Roy notes that among the tribes, feminists are rejecting patriarchal social and power institutions and pursuing "unfeminine" endeavors. One of the many challenges faced by female reformists or revolutionaries is external sexual exploitation. Since Revathy was employed by the PLGA1 and was viciously raped by several officials, she details the brutality of these outsiders who took her by force, "cutting my skin with a knife blade." Two are holding my wrists, and two are holding my knees. "So, you think you are a great heroine?" "We would like to give you a gift for your celebration." They all repeatedly sexually assaulted me (423).

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Rape is considered a tactic of oppression and dominance that men utilize against women. As a symbol of male dominance, violence is a threat to women. It gives men the right to abuse women. Susan Brownmiller discusses how a woman's psychology is shaped and how her thoughts and actions are guided by her dread of being raped. By keeping all women in a state of fear, she claims that rape "is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation" (Brownmiller 15).

According to Roy, Adivasi women's social, economic, political, and cultural circumstances underscore the reality that Adivasi women cannot be freed until the oppression and exploitation of landowners, industrialists, and imperialists ceases, and patriarchal oppression is curbed. Men and women must engage in these efforts together.

### Conclusion

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness by Arundhati Roy demonstrates how nature and women are intertwined. She has investigated how nature might be welcomed to change the gendered issues that have been developed to silence women and other non-human life via the viewpoint of ecofeminism. Roy has attempted to expose the harsh reality that, in the modern society, women and the environment are exploited as resources to satisfy the wants of males. Both must be eliminated in order to put an end to the injustice because they are both raped and oppressed in different ways. According to ecofeminism, women are capable of bringing about ecological change. By highlighting their intimate connection to nature, it could be interpreted as a way for women to express themselves. Through her book, Roy was able to inspire and motivate women to take on the role of change agents. She skillfully illustrates the ambiguous link between women and nature in the modern world and has written all the events in her current novel with beauty.

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