



DEVELOPMENT OR DESTRUCTION: A STUDY OF THE GREATER COMMON GOOD AND THE END OF IMAGINATION

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ABSTRACT

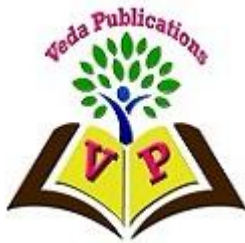
Literature has some purpose to fulfill, some thoughts to be contemplated and some plans to be acted upon for the welfare of humanity. Arundhati Roy is one of the foremost writers of this socially committed tradition showing exceptional awareness of the social crisis and sensitivity to the problems. She is one of the few Indian Writers in English who is actively interested in contemporary social-political issues which are amply evidenced in a number of articles, interviews and books she wrote on various topics in recent years. Arundhati Roy, the author shows acute sensitiveness to her surroundings which is reflected in her nonfictional works, books and essays. She has been an impassioned critic of globalization and American influence and felt herself part of the contemporary struggle for social justice in our country. In all these works it is not difficult to see her splendid ability to balance between the significant social impact of industrialization and more minute observations. Her writings like *"The Algebra of Infinite Justice"*, *"War is Peace"*, *"The End of Imagination"*, *"The Greater Common Good"* have created great stir and put her in a storm of controversies that has only increased her stature as an intellectual.

Keywords: Power, Activist, Government, Discrimination, Injustice, Destruction.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Roy always show her concern for the poor, the Dalit , Women and the discriminated one within the society and we can make out that in her later writings; among them some are —*The Algebra of Infinite Justice*”, “*War is Peace*”, “*The End of Imagination*”, “*The Greater Common Good*” etc which depicts the façade scenario of the modern society where on one side the people were endorsed with fundamental rights of Democracy and on the other, those rights were snatched away by the big leaders of the nation in the name of development, While criticizing the government’s role Roy herself states in one of her speech :

“Flags are bits of colored cloth that governments use first to shrink-wrap people’s minds and then as ceremonial shrouds to bury the dead”.

The Greater Common Good is a thought provoking revolutionary article (now it is in the form of a book) by Arundhati Roy. It deals with the author’s rational and progressive attitude to the dam projects of the government; her sympathetic talks with the sufferers of the Narmada Valley Project ; her harsh and rugged satire on the faulty decision and adverse attitude of the political parties and above all, her wordsworthian nostalgia for the natural scenes and sights of nature . Roy’s work ‘*The Greater Common Good*’, Where Jawaharlal Nehru- the leader remarked to the villagers who were to be displaced by the Hirakud Dam, 1948.-

“If you are to suffer, you should suffer in the interest of the country” (The greater Common Good, p.47)

Morarji Desai, while speaking at public meeting in the submergence zone of the pong dam in 1961 stated

“We will request you to move from your homes after the dam comes up. If you move it will be good. Otherwise we shall release the waters and down you all” – (The Greater Common Good, p.55).

We can stretch the parallelism in Arundhati Roy’s works as well where she has weaved the same of the contemporary society. In her essay —*The Greater Common Good*”, she elaborately explained that our true enemies were not the neighboring countries, not the physical boundaries but it was the evils wearing

the mask of the great politicians who sowed the seed of hatred in our soul in the name of betterment of the country. While completing big projects in the name of countries’ development they are actually oppressing the poor people making them homeless specially the ‘Adivasis’ for whom the nature was their means of livelihood. Destroying the nature for the big dam projects and compensating them with bare lands where they couldn’t even earn their livelihood. Making them homeless by means of force which can be shown as a discourse of the European dominating ideologies existed in the form of ‘power’ where the capitalist always oppress the proletariat .She ironically goes on thanking the great creator of the nation the USA, who sowed the seed of superiority and objectifying the other cultures as inferior to theirs. While Joseph Conrad blames the darkness of the European’s cruel treatment of the natives, an unfathomable darkness within every human being for committing heinous acts of evil , in his ‘*Heart of Darkness*’

The book reminds us of what Wordsworth , the great poet and philosopher of Nature observes :

“The world is too much with us, late and soon
Giving and spending we lay waste our powers
Little we see in Nature that is ours

We have given our hearts away to a sordid
boon”.

The book opens _ “I Stood on a hill and laughed out loud”. Here the laughing is not the general laughing but it is full of sarcastic irony. The author laughed loud because the sons and daughters of the displaced tribal people are not happy at all in the resettled colonies. Because the homes of the tribal people are not the big buildings or great mansions in the polluted and populated cities, but an open sky, far from the madding crowd, saturated with age long myths and traditions, songs and dances, fruits and flowers .The excerpts from a letter from Bava Mahalia of Jalsindhi Village in Jhabua district to Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Digvijay Singh in 1994, very clearly answers the laugh of the Booker Prize winner author, Arundhati Roy. The letter says :

“We have lived in the forests for generations. The forest is our moneylender and banker. In hard times we go to the forests. We build our houses from its wood. From its rushes and splints



we weave screens. From the forests we make baskets and cots, ploughs and hoes and many other useful things... .We get various kind of grasses; and when the grasses become dry in summer, we still get leaves... . If there is famine we survive by eating roots and tubers. When we fall sick, our medicine men bring us back to health by giving us leaves, roots, bark from the forest . We collect and sell gum, tendu leaves, bahera, chironji and mahua. The forest is like our mother; we have grown up in its lap. We know how to live by sucking at her breast. If we were made to live in a land without forests, then all this knowledge that we have cherished for generations will be useless and slowly we will forget it all".

It is the psychology of human mind that however poor and miserable the man's home may be, he is so much emotionally tagged to it that all through his life the memory of his birth place always haunts him and compels him to come back to his home. A house may be a place of all the facilities but it lacks love and affection, affinity and happiness. But, on the other hand, a home (though without any wall and roof, just under the shade of a tree) is always made of love and dreams. And the forests and rivers the hills and the mountain of the tribal people are their real homes which provide them love and affection, livelihood and nourishment.

Moreover, it is very astounding that the government of India has detailed figures for production of foodgrains but hasn't a figure for the number of people displaced by dams or sacrificed in other ways at the alters of "National Progress". The author holds the view :

" The millions of displaced people in India are nothing but refugees of an unacknowledged war. And we like the citizens of white America and French Canada and Hitler's Germany, are condoning it by looking away. Why? Because we are told that it is being done for the sake of the Greater Common Good. That it's being done in the name of progress, in the name of National Interest . Therefore, gladly, unquestioningly, almost gratefully, we believe what we're told. We believe that it benefits us to believe" (The Greater Common Good8-9)

Big dams, these days, are no longer the monuments of modern civilization, emblem of man's ascendancy

over Nature. Monuments are generally unaging, timeless and are full of worship and devotion. But the recent havoc caused by the big dams all over the world is the testimony of the fact that big dams do the opposite of what people say about them.

The other problem associated with the dam projects is the heavy loan India has taken from the World Bank for the development aid given to the sufferers of the said project. But the irony is that India is in a situation where it pays back more money to the bank in interest and repayments of principal than it receives from it. We are forced to create new debts in order to be able to repay our old ones. The author is of the view that

"The relationship between us is exactly like the relationship between a landless labourer steeped in debt and the local Bania—it is an affectionate relationship, the poor man loves his Bania because he's always there when he's needed. It's not for nothing that we call the world a global village. The only differences between the landless labourer and the Government of India is that one uses the money to survive. The other just funnels it into the private coffers of its officers and agents, pushing the country into an economic bondage that it may never overcome".(The Greater Common Good11-12)

The other great drawback which Roy points out is the earthquake caused by the reservoir of the dam. Activists protesting against the construction of dams on the Narmada (in Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh), the Tehri (in Uttar Pradesh) and Bedthi (Karnataka) argues that dams would lead to R.I.S. (reservoir induced seismicity) and subsequently earthquake. The Uttar Kashi and Jabalpur earthquakes are often cited to support their argument.

Now the question is : Can electricity or other facilities be generated at the cost of a number of poor people of the villages or the forests? Is it not wrong to displace a large number of tribal people from their home land—the forests and the rivers to which they are nostalgically attached?

It is this inhuman treatment to the dalit and the deserted, the poor and the defenceless that compelled Arundhati Roy to visit the site of the dam and made her to write this poignant ode on the trials



and tribulations of the fate of the sufferers. Perhaps this is why, the author calls upon all section of society to come and think over this giant and universal problem. She thinks :

“ The war for the Narmada Valley is not just some exotic tribal war or a remote rural war or even an exclusively Indian war. It is a war for the rivers and the mountains and the forests of the world. All sorts of warriors from all over the world anyone who wishes to enlist, will be honoured and welcomed. Every kind of warriors will be needed. Doctors, lawyers, teachers, judges, journalists, students, sportsmen, painters, actors, singers, lovers... .The borders are open, folks! Come on in” (The Greater Common Good17).

On the other hand, In response to India's testing of nuclear weapons in Pokhran, Rajasthan, She wrote —*The End of Imagination*, a critique of the Indian government's nuclear policies, where she has shown the extent of disaster that we cannot even imagine. It was published in her collection *“The Algebra of Infinite Justice”*, in which she also crusaded against India's massive hydroelectric dam projects in the central and western states of Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat.

“ Twentieth century armaments are an insurance against small and trivial wars. On the other hand, they are absolute guarantee that when ‘vital interests’ and ‘national honour’ are at stake, the resulting war shall be unprecedentedly destructive.”

—Aldous Huxley

In fact, there is much new and a lot original in the manner in which Arundhati Roy has made her point tellingly and poured out her inner pain and agony on account of the sinisterly emerging phenomenon. Such a time is an hour of reckoning for the writers, intellectuals and all those men and women who listen to the dictates of their conscience.

Presenting a grim and dreadful scenario of what the situation will be like if there is a nuclear war, Arundhati Roy observes very succinctly “our cities and forests, our fields and villages will burn for days. Rivers will turn to poison. The air will become fire. The wind will spread the flames. When everything there is to burn has burned and the fires

die, smoke will rise and shut out the sun. The earth will be enveloped in darkness. There will be no day_ only interminable night. Temperatures will drop to far below freezing and nuclear winter will set in. Water will turn toxic ice. Radioactive fallout will seep through the earth and contaminate ground water. Most living things, animal and vegetable, fish and fowl, will die. Only rats and cockroaches will breed and multiply and compete with foraging, relict humans for what little food there is... Burned and blind, bald and ill, carrying the cancerous carcasses of our children in our arms, where shall we go? What shall we drink? What shall we breathe?” (The End Of Imagination 62) .

Moreover, who will be sure as to who will survive? The author mocks at the suggestions of some of the medical specialists of taking iodine pills, remaining indoors, consuming only stored water and food and avoiding milk. She woefully laments that it is not so. And hence writes:

“If there is a nuclear war, our foes will not be China or Pakistan. Our foe will be earth itself. The very elements, the sky, the air, the land, the wind and the water, will all turn against us, their wrath will be terrible.”(The End of Imagination 62)

In fact, such far-sighted but very holistic observations nay death-knell warnings have already been given from time to time by our sages, saints, philosophers and well-meaning individuals. They too have been reminding the world that ‘freedom’ is a very sharp-edged weapon that can end up causing immense harm if it is not handled prudently and judiciously.

CONCLUSION

So, what is the need of the day is not to waste our powers but to turn them into right direction. Science is a blessing when it is carefully used. But it becomes curse when it is used for the annihilation of human race. Written with typical wit, lively imagination and verbal abondan, the article gives a subtle warning of the dangers of the emergence of a more integrated Big Bussiness_ Government power structure, Backed up by remolded militarism, new technocratic ideologies and more advanced arts of ruling and fooling the



subtle subversion of several strands of friendly fascism.

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