

An Eco-Critical Viewpoint on Arundhati Roy's Critique of Nuclear Weapons.

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Abstract:

Suzanna Arundhati Roy has heterodox views on every issue she takes up. Her activism is motivated by her revolutionary views. The revolutionary views and ideas lead her to be a part of environmental activism. This activist's temperament was imbibed from her mother who was also a women's rights activist. Her activism touches up on a great range of issues from India's nuclear bomb testing to the recent Farmers' Bill of 2020 in India and from the wars instigated by the USA in the Middle East countries to the displacement of the tribals in Central India. She has questioned the policies of Indian and Pakistan governments that developed, tested and amassed the nuclear weapons. She elaborates up on the impacts of the explosion of nuclear bombs, wars being instigated by America and their deadly consequences on the planet earth. The present article endeavors to analyze the activism of Arundhati Roy with respect to her critique of wars and nuclear weapons from the eco-critical perspective.

Key Words: Environment, ecology, nuclear weapons, radioactive fallout, creature, extinction, riot, proliferation, contamination, etc.

Introduction

The emergence of industrial revolution has given humans a great scope to utilize nature and natural resources for their own welfare which has led to many ecological problems eventually. The developments in the industrial sector, science and technology have resulted in many natural resources being used up in addition to the extinction of some living creatures.

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Numerous writers, activists, humanists and ecologists have come forward to defend the preservation of environment. Some of them have taken the issues to the streets by holding rallies while some others have limited their activism only to their writings. Both these groups of people are sensitive personalities who crave not only for the welfare of the human beings but also for the preservation of ecology. The present article discusses the dangers of a possible nuclear warfare which leads to numerous ecological problems as explored by Arundhati Roy.

“*Ecology* is the study of the relationships between living organisms, including humans, and their physical environment” (wikipedia). The term was coined by Ernst Heinrich Philipp August Haeckel, a German scientist, in 1866. An *ecologist* is a person who is interested in ecology and believes that the environment should be protected. Arundhati Roy is a prominent Indian socio-political activist who fights for the sustainable environment. Debarati Bandyopadhyay opined,she [Arundhati Roy] 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 environment, (Bandyopadhyay 5).

Arundhati Roy fears that the nuclear war between India and Pakistan may lead to the destruction of environment and the deterioration of ecological balance. In *The End of Imagination* (2016), she portrays the dangerous environmental effects of nuclear bombs’ explosion. She laments that India and Pakistan have been competing for the acquisition as well as testing of nuclear bombs rather than focusing on developmental activities. She firmly believes in the fact that not many species on this earth can survive if there is a nuclear war. Millions of people will die if such fatal war takes place. The animals, trees, birds and small creatures will become extinct. Water will be polluted and air will become poisonous under such unwanted circumstances. M/s Roy says, “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”(Roy, *The End of Imagination* 46). After the nuclear war, the land won't be useful to live in and to cultivate. It will no more be suitable for human habitation. It will be surrounded by fire and noxious gases.

Radioactive fallout pollutes water which will become poisonous. The aquatic creatures, trees and even tiny creatures on the earth will be endangered.

She says that our leaders crave for collecting nuclear bombs; but what we need is sufficient hygienic food for all the people. Everyone should be educated in the country. The government should provide education and employment for the people. The people must be provided with safe drinking water. On the other hand, keeping all these responsibilities and developmental activities aside, our leaders who are in the power are busy preparing for a war against our neighboring countries. M/s Roy says,

We are a nation of a billion people. In development terms we rank No. 138 out of the 175 countries listed in the UNDP's 1997 Human Development Index. More than 400 million of our people are illiterate and live in absolute poverty, over 600 million lack even basic sanitation and over 200 million have no drinking water (Roy, *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* 19).

She demands for providing the basic needs to the poor. She is deeply concerned about the development of the poor. The development activities should be carried out by Indian government.

She criticizes American government for perpetrating rivalries between India and Pakistan just to sell their weapons. She also says that the leaders of the USA consider most of the issues from a business point of view. As the two countries buy weapons from the USA, it pushes and pulls the two countries towards war. M/s Roy points out, “[r]ecently the United States played an important part in forcing India and Pakistan back from the brink of war” (Roy, *My Seditious Heart* 200). As a developed nation in economy, science and technology, the USA should help the developing and the poor countries. It should share technology to the under developed countries to boost up their economy, science and technology. But instead, it is promoting the proliferation nuclear weapons and wars. Roy condemns such ego centric attitude of America and urges the country to refrain from interfering if not aiding.

America sometimes, with the collaboration of Britain, encourages the Middle East countries towards starting up a war. Due to such encouragement, there created a war-like attitude among the leaders of the Middle East countries. The leaders of America and Britain mislead

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them to exploit the natural resources in the countries. They encouraged Saddam Hussein to kill his own people in Northern Iraq. He killed thousands of Kurdish people using machine guns and Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). Even on such tyrannical oppression the US government supported him. When he hadn't followed its orders, it bombed Iraqi lands. Hundreds of tons of depleted uranium were piled on the land making the fields barren. Thousands of missiles and chemical weapons destroyed Iraqi lands that were dropped by the British and American forces. George Bush called the United States 'a peace loving nation'. But in reality it is not so. If his government is a peace seeking government it should not have acted violently on Iraq and Afghanistan. M/s Roy feels that Bush should have acted as a leader, but not as a dictator. Arundhati Roy says:

Recently the United States played an important part in forcing India and Pakistan back from the brink of war. Is it so hard for it to take its own advice? Who is guilty of feckless moralizing? Of preaching peace while it wages war? The United States, which George Bush calls "a peaceful nation," [Bush's remarks] has been at war with one country or another every year for the last fifty years (Roy, *War Talk* 67-8).

Due to wars, explosion of bombs and the wholesale destruction with modern weaponry, the lands become barren. People's health gets deteriorated. They damage the environment that leads to extinction of plants, birds and animals. Environment destruction in various forms such as water pollution, air pollution, soil contamination, atmospheric pollution, thermal pollution and radioactive contamination are some of the results of nuclear war. Due to the pollution of air and water, acid rains occur, among other things. The quality of human lives decreases. Many diseases like cancer, ulcer and various swellings affect the population in the war zones. Roy gives an example of such consequences taken from Iraq war. She points out, "In southern Iraq, there has been a fourfold increase in cancer among children" (Roy, *War Talk* 65). The land becomes barren for life and for cultivation. Nothing will grow to feed the living things and to give shelter to them. She questions, "Burned and blind and bald and ill, carrying the cancerous carcasses of our children in our arms, where shall we go? What shall we eat? What shall we drink? What shall we breathe?" (Roy, *The End of Imagination* 47).

But there seems to be an alternative as suggested by the Head of the Health, Environment and Safety Group of the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC) in Bombay. He said it is better to take iodine pills, stay indoors using stored water and food (Ctd. Roy, *The End of Imagination* 47). But, is it practically possible for all the people of India? We are a nation of more than hundred crore population most of whom are poor. They can't even afford to take meal at least two times a day. So, they can't buy iodine pills, stored water and food to survive. The best choice for them is to die rather than to live dying, because after surviving the nuclear war, cancer, ulcer and swelling, living is a torture to anyone. At such chaotic situation Roy laments, "From now on it is not dying we must fear, but living" (Roy, *The End of Imagination*, 49).

Now both the countries Pakistan and India have acquired numerous nuclear bombs. One day or the other every country in the world will have them because they too have borders and need security for their people and resources. So, the proliferation of nuclear bombs will increase. Everybody will start to make more powerful bombs rather than producing food grains. The earth will have more missiles than food on it. We will have to be satisfied by saying that we have more powerful bombs; but having empty stomachs. We really don't want this type of world. We should not be misled by anybody who can push us towards wars and destruction. Nuclear weapons will control our behavior and rule us. Our society will be run by the fear of them. Roy grieves, "They are the ultimate colonizer" (Roy, *The End of Imagination* 49-50), referring to the nuclear weapons. All the denizens in the affected area will become the victims of the Weapons of Mass Destruction. They can't sleep due to the perennial fear of the nuclear war.

The bombs have no boundary, no color, no caste, no religion and no nation. It destroys everything it could spread. Everybody is already radioactive. We cannot escape from the harmful effects of nuclear destruction. The devastating situation is unpredictable. There is a live example before us that happened during and after the Second World War in Japan. Lakhs of people died and many more were affected by it. Mark Selden comments, "With more than 200,000 dead by the end of 1945 in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and with many more dying in subsequent years, nuclear weapons emerged as the nonpareil weapon of mass destruction, their power magnified by the mystique of radiation" (Selden, 10). It is harmful not only to humans but also to all the creatures and even to the non-living constituents of the environment. The present forms of

civilization, lifestyles and developments have come from millions of years of evolution of species on the earth. In a wink of an eye, everything will be demolished bringing all the fruits of this sustained evolution to nothing.

Arundhati Roy felt ashamed of reading the newspaper headlines such as “Road to Resurgence,” “Explosion of Self-Esteem,” and “A Moment of Pride” that were published following the nuclear tests in 1998 in India. A leader of a political party went to the extent of saying, “We have proved that we are not eunuchs anymore”. The then Indian Defense Minister proclaimed “We have superior strength and potency” referring to the nuclear test of the government of Pakistan. Many of the Indians told that these are not only nuclear tests but also tests of nationalism (Ctd. Roy *The End of Imagination* 45-64). Roy says, in any reason and circumstances, whoever criticized the tests were branded as anti-national and anti-Hindu because they called the bomb is India and India is the bomb; so whoever talked against the Indian bomb would be punished. Of course, when we think from the other end, the Pakistanis will think of Pakistan is bomb and bomb is Pakistan; the bomb is Islamic and vice versa. Everybody has his/her own thinking. They also think that whoever criticizes Pakistan is against Islam and so be punished. But the real thing is that nuclear weapons don't think of our nation, religion or any boundary. They destroy by exploding everyone and everything. The explosion leads to numerous modes of pollution that cause the extinction of many living things. People faced two world wars in the 20th century. There will be no chance of surviving on the earth if there is any third world war. It will destroy the world completely. Bertrand Russell and Albert Einstein, too renowned pacifists, warned the people of the world about the consequences of a nuclear war and also urged for the peaceful resolution to avoid “universal death”, (*russell-einstein-manifesto*).

Roy has own thoughts regarding a nation that is caste free and religion free. People have to live without bias against other groups of people. If her criticism against having nuclear bomb in India is considered anti-national and anti-Hindu, she is ready to secede in order to be free and independent. She feels that she is a citizen of the world which has no boundary, no territory and no flag. She is ready to sign in favor of any nuclear test ban treaty or for nuclear non-proliferation treaty. She accepts immigrants into her country. She treats it is a utopian world wherein there should be no war. The people in it have to live in good environment. But the

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present world, she says, is flawed. It is an unviable and wounded world. She criticizes the present world because she loves it too much. She doesn't like the world be dismembered and dead. She wants her leaders to fulfill most of the needs of the people in the country. She is liberal in welcoming all types of people into it. She gives importance to each and everyone in it. She loves the country because it has been giving shelter to a number of races, cultures, religions and castes for thousands of years. The people in India have been living peacefully for thousands of years. It has been a great choice of living in India. Many kings and emperors invaded India, some left and some other mingled with the already living people. Everything has changed in India now. The present day India is a nuclear power. Most of the Indians welcomed the nuclear test in a grand manner but they didn't think of the consequences of nuclear war. The world may end if there is a nuclear war. M/s Roy predicts, "If nuclear weapons exist, then nuclear war is a real possibility. And Delhi is a prime target" (Roy, *War Talk 2*).

Though the two countries India and Pakistan are separate nations now, they were one entity once. The relatives of some Indians might be living in Pakistan and Pakistanis relatives also might be living in India. Both the countries, to some extent, have to share same water, same sky and same winds from the nature. If there is a nuclear war between these two countries, the radioactive fallout spreads where the wind takes it to. It doesn't know the borders, regions, cities and people. Cities like Amritsar and Lahore are not far away to escape the inexorable speed. If Lahore is bombed, Punjab will also be affected. Gujarat, Rajasthan and Bombay also affect if Karachi is bombed. Finally, if there is a nuclear war between these two countries, both get seriously affected. The people, the sky, water, wind, nature, soil, forests, animals and small creatures everything gets affected. So the leaders of governments of the two countries should be cautious about the effects of thermonuclear destruction. Roy laments, "...every friend, every tree, every home, every dog, squirrel and bird that I have known and loved--- is incinerated, how shall I live on? Whom shall I love? And who will love me back?"(Roy, *War Talk 2*). The dangerous effects of nuclear war can't be mitigated in a short period of time. It takes hundreds of years to overcome the impacts of poisonous gases on the earth. The war of Indian government will not only be on other country, but also on Indians too; Indians have to face the worst effects in the history.

Indian government should neither go for acquisition of nuclear weapons, nor development of them. It should not run after the Western developments of missiles and nuclear weapons. According to M/s Roy the development of Western countries is mere materialistic. They were developed owing to numerous sacrifices of other peoples. They were developed by imposing slavery, colonialism, apartheid, biological warfare, ethnic cleansing and deploying chemical weapons on others. They looted wealth of many countries in the world. Their development is not comprehensive but ephemeral. Though Indians have less food and less money, they had and still have all the other kinds of wealth. Though they have nuclear technology, they should not use it for destructive purposes. They should be determined that their actions must not lead to the destruction of the earth.

Arundhati Roy says that it is easier to make nuclear bombs than to educate all the people in a country. But who gets benefit from it? None could. The science is to help the people lead their lives happier; not to make it harder and difficult. New inventions must be done for the benefit of majority of the people. There was an opinion poll on nuclear bombs development and testing in India. According to the poll, almost all loved the bomb. Here she questions whether the people know what the nuclear bomb is, whether they know the consequences of the nuclear bomb explosion; whether they know about thermal blasts, and radioactive fallout of the nuclear winter. She feels that most of the Indians are illiterates. They don't know how to write their names at least. They don't have the knowledge of bombs and their dreadful results if there is a nuclear war. They don't have words in their languages to explain the technical words relating to nuclear explosion. Nobody can explain to them if they want to know. Roy doubts the reliability of these polls. She argues, if there is an explosion of nuclear bomb, mother nature--- hills, streams, rivers, forests, the sky and the land--- everything turns to ash and becomes useless. None can reshape them. That's the reason why M/s Roy calls nuclear destruction as anti-human, anti-democratic and the most evil thing that man has ever made.

Conclusion:

Arundhati Roy leaves no stone unturned to bring home the deleterious effects and devastating effects of nuclear bombs. Her criticism goes against America's nuclear weapons trading in different countries and encouragement of riots for their personal benefit. She is not

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complacent about these nightmarish possibilities; as a humanitarian writer she craves for the universal survival and sustainability of humanity. Debarati Bandyopadhyay has rightly said, “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” (Bandyopadhyay, 5). There is no self-glorification in her speeches and writings. She analyses and criticizes regional, national and international laws as well. However, she mainly focuses on the nuclear weapons testing, development and their consequences of India and Pakistan. Her message will be clear to us if we think beyond the narrow regional and national barriers of chauvinism keeping universal brotherhood in mind. Thus her concerns are not confined only to her country, India, but extends to all the countries and not only to humans but to all the living and non-living things, testifying the breadth and profundity of her outlook.

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