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Subaltern ecologies and embodied resistance: A comparative study of environmental justice and caste in Arundhati Roy's the ministry of utmost happiness and Bama's Sangati

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Abstract
This study looks at the connections between environmental justice, caste oppression, and embodied resistance in Arundhati Roy's The Ministry of Utmost Happiness and Bama's Sangati. This is an important but not well-studied area of modern Indian literature. People have studied both authors a lot for how they write about subaltern voices, but this study looks at their stories in a new way by putting them in the context of subaltern ecologies. It looks at how marginalised bodies interact with, live in, and take back ecological spaces that have been taken away, damaged, or excluded. The study looks at how caste and gender differences are not only written on bodies but also spread out across graveyards, slums, and rural landscapes, using ecofeminist theory, Dalit studies, and postcolonial ecocriticism. The characters' interactions with land, trash, and the environment show a politics of resistance that goes against the mainstream ideas of purity, appropriateness, and belonging. The essay says that Roy and Bama change natural areas into places of dignity, survival, and political assertion. This adds to the growing conversation on eco-social justice in Indian literature. The research gives us a new way to look at modern Indian literature by focussing on the connections between environmental instability and caste-gender discrimination. It also broadens the range of ecocritical and subaltern literary analysis.

Keywords: Subaltern ecologies, environmental justice, caste and gender, embodied resistance, and postcolonial ecocriticism

Introduction

In postcolonial literary studies, the convergence of caste, gender, and environmental degradation is becoming more and more important, although it is still not well-studied in the context of Indian subaltern tales. Environmental discourse has mostly been shaped by elite, technocratic, or conservationist points of view. However, recent literary works from the edges have started to express a counter-ecology based on the real-life experiences of dispossession, bodily oppression, and territorial exclusion. This article wants to add to this new conversation by looking at how Arundhati Roy's The Ministry of Utmost Happiness and Bama's Sangati show how people who are not in power relate to land, waste, and the environment through the ideas of embodied resistance and environmental justice.

Roy and Bama both tell stories that are strongly connected to the real and metaphorical places where India's most marginalised groups live, such as Dalits, hijras, Muslims, and rural women. The main characters in their stories are not only victims of social and political exclusion; they are also active actors who use physiological, geographical, and ecological modes of resistance to get through harsh settings. In these pieces, graveyards, slums, rural alleyways, and polluted city spaces aren't just places; they're living, breathing places where people fight for their dignity, identity, and existence. But most critical research has looked at these works only through the lenses of trauma, identity politics, or resistance, ignoring the ecological aspects that are part of these stories.

This study tries to fill that vacuum by using ideas from postcolonial ecocriticism, Dalit studies, and eco-feminism. It looks at how Roy and Bama see dirty, abandoned, or neglected areas as places where people may build new communities and ecological connections. These writers challenge the common ideas of environmental purity and spatial hierarchy and

instead focus on subaltern ecologies, where resistance is embodied and closely linked to damaged settings. By doing this, their works strongly criticise environmental casteism and spatial inequality, and they also open up new ways to think about eco-social resistance in Indian literature.

Environmental Casteism and Spatial Margins

In both The Ministry of Utmost Happiness and Sangati, space is more than just a setting; it is also a physical and symbolic record of caste-based and gender-based discrimination. Arundhati Roy and Bama show how caste and purity affect the way people think about space, the environment, and land abandonment. This creates what can be called "environmental casteism," a type of systemic injustice that forces marginalised groups to live in polluted, unsafe, or undesirable areas.

Roy places her main character Anjum, a hijra and a Muslim, in the setting of a graveyard in The Ministry of Utmost Happiness. Anjum builds her home in a cemetery after experiencing violence and exclusion in her community. She turns it into the "Jannat Guest House." Here, Roy turns the usual idea of graveyards as places of death and despair on its head, imagining them instead as places of alternative community and subaltern strength. Roy says, "She lived in the graveyard, where no one came to ask questions." "Anjum found the freedom to be alive in the land of the dead" (Roy 27). This choice of site is quite political: Anjum and the others who join her in the graveyard are going back to a place that isn't on social or administrative maps, creating a place to survive in the middle of a city that is falling apart.

Roy's picture of Delhi is far different from the clean picture of the modern metropolis. The book talks about its slums, trash areas, and unauthorised graveyards as parts of India's socioeconomic structures. The city's environment isn't neutral; it shows the underlying differences in caste, gender, and religion that determine who may live in clean, safe, and legal settings. The fact that the graveyard is near to a rubbish dump and is home to queer people, poor people, and those who have been erased from politics shows how caste-coded ecological neglect and spatial exclusion are.

In the same way, the environmental conditions of the Dalit colony in Bama's Sangati, called the cheri, are always being ignored. The neighbourhood is far away from the main village and can't get to clean water, sanitation, or basic infrastructure. "Our streets never get cleaned." Our trash rots just outside our doors. The water is constantly dirty. "It's like they want us to live like animals" (Bama 13). In this case, the caste system literally links social impurity to where people live. The Dalit women of Sangati face not just caste prejudice but also being left behind in the environment, where they live in dangerous conditions that are made normal by structural violence.

This relationship is similar to Rob Nixon's idea of "slow violence," which says that environmental harm isn't sudden or dramatic, but happens slowly and disproportionately impacts populations who are already marginalised (Nixon 2). Roy's and Bama's characters live in dirty, unsafe, and run-down places that are examples of this kind of passive violence, when harm to the environment is used to erase people from society.

In the end, both writers face an aristocratic, Brahmanical environmentalism that puts animal sanctuaries and urban green zones first and ignores the ecological problems that marginalised human groups face. In Roy's and Bama's works, graveyards, slums, and the edges of villages are no longer seen as wastelands, but as landscapes of resistance that are full of other ways to live, have dignity, and be part of a community.

Resistance in the Body and Ecological Belonging

In the writing of Arundhati Roy and Bama, resistance is not only verbal or cerebral; it is deeply embodied, based on the bodily experiences and geographical practices of people who are on the outside. The Ministry of Utmost Happiness and Sangati show resistance as coming from living in degraded or socially rejected spaces every day, where the characters use their bodies, work, and alternative kinship to challenge dominant ideas about purity, pollution, and the value of the environment. This kind of resistance is also connected to what might be called "ecological belonging," which is a type of relational identity and rootedness that comes from experienced, emotive, and moral ties to land and community rather than state-sanctioned territoriality.

In The Ministry of Utmost Happiness, Roy's main character Anjum is a hijra and a Muslim who is always denied a place in normal social and physical environments. After the riots in Gujarat in 2002, Anjum decides to leave civilisation and live in a graveyard, a place that is normally thought of as dirty, dead, and outside of society. Anjum's choice to dwell among the dead, on the other hand, is not a retreat but a political reclaiming. The graveyard becomes a home for other misfits, such as orphans, handicapped people, and other people who have lost their homes. Roy says, "She built her own room, then two more, and finally a guest house for the odd one out—for the one who had nowhere else to go" (Roy 42). Living in contaminated or "non-living" space with a live body is a type of resistance that goes against the prevalent spatial logic of caste, gender, and religion.

In Roy's story, the body becomes a place where politics are expressed. Anjum's hijra identity, her bodily change, and her embodied difference put her outside of the categories of citizenry that are established by the state and by heterosexual norms. But her body also supports a new kind of ecological existence that isn't based on private property or clean zones, but on shared danger and survival. The graveyard, which seems dead, turns into a place of eco-social regeneration, where life may grow. In this approach, Roy criticises clean environmentalism and urban spatial politics and instead proposes a picture of ecology that starts at the edges and is kept alive by the presence of those who are not in power.

In the same way, Bama focusses on the lives of Dalit women in Sangati, whose resistance is shown via their hard work, fortitude, and daily navigation of space. Sangati shows how Dalit women perceive the environment via bodily hardship, such as trekking long distances for water, working in bad circumstances, and living in substandard housing and sanitation. This is different from elite feminist or environmental discourses that frequently remove the body from the environment. One character says, "We work like animals all day and night." We have no option but to let our legs bulge and our backs crack (Bama 57). In this case, the female body is not just a place where people are exploited, but it is also a storehouse of survival skills and strength. The everyday fight to stay alive in neglected areas is not passive; it is quite political since it confirms their right

to live and work in places that the dominant society has categorised as dirty or unwanted.

The narrator in Sangati also talks about how Dalit women develop informal support, care, and solidarity networks. Feminist theorists like Sara Ahmed call these kinds of actions "affective economies," where emotions, compassion, and community become instruments of resistance (Ahmed 12). These are the kinds of things that formal politics generally ignores. Even though these women's bodies have been hurt by institutional violence, they are nonetheless active agents of space-making, fighting against both caste-based exclusion and patriarchal erasure.

Roy and Bama both provide a different way of thinking about the environment, one that comes from living in areas that are full with ecological and social garbage. Their protagonists don't want to escape to perfect nature or undisturbed landscapes; instead, they claim to belong in polluted, neglected, and metaphorically dirty places. The body, which is characterised by caste, gender, and religion, becomes a way to reclaim the environment and criticise politics.

Reimagining Ecology via Different Ways of Seeing the World

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness by Arundhati Roy and Sangati by Bama both change the way we think about ecology by focussing on the lived experiences, spiritual practices, and everyday survival of those who are not in power. In the past, environmentalism in both India and across the world has focused on preservationist ideas, such as protecting untouched landscapes, biodiversity, and wilderness. This kind of environmental thinking typically ignores the voices and presence of the poor, especially those from Dalit, Adivasi, and other marginalised groups whose environments are often polluted, full with trash, and taken away from them. Roy and Bama fight against this dominant view by expressing a subaltern ecological awareness that is based on the connections between land, caste, gender, and struggle, not on purity and separation from human existence.

Roy's portrayal of environment in The Ministry of Utmost Happiness is not pretty or perfect. The places her characters live—graveyards, slums, rubbish dumps, and neighbourhoods that the government has erased—make up an ecology of survival. In most conversations, these places are seen as unclean, lifeless, or inhospitable. But Roy gives them life and significance. The graveyard, for instance, is a place of death, but also of community, change, and new life. Roy says, "There were no caste divisions, no communal riots, and no hierarchy inside the graveyard." Just silent. "Only trees" (Roy 54). In this assertion, the graveyard paradoxically becomes a perfect ecological area, free from the violence and hierarchy of the outside world.

So, Roy's ecological vision goes against the elite environmentalist approach. She doesn't separate people from environment; instead, she shows how shared precarity is the basis for ecological interactions. Anjum's burial community is made up of orphans, transgender people, mentally ill people, and animals. This group of different species changes the way we think about ecological belonging. This framework fits with new theoretical work in postcolonial ecocriticism and queer ecology, which call for a wider view of ecology as a place of inclusiveness and moral cohabitation that goes beyond state boundaries and standard identities (Ghosh 121; Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 4).

Bama's Sangati also shows an environment that is a part of the daily lives of Dalit women, where land is not just an idea but something they live on, work on, and deal with. The Dalit colony has terrible environmental conditions, such as trash, unclean drinking water, and poor sanitation. However, Bama does not say that these areas have no ecological significance. Instead, she talks about how the ladies make sense of things and feel at home even in places that are so dangerous. Their connection to the land isn't romanticised; it's practical, physical, and profoundly connected to social and spiritual aspects of life.

In one scenario, a character talks about how their rituals and celebrations are changed to fit their restricted resources, yet they still have a lot of ecological meaning and community involvement (Bama 89). These actions of survival and celebration show that Dalit people see the world in an ecological way. They don't see land as sacred just because it hasn't been disturbed; they see it as sacred because it supports life and a shared identity. This view fits with Vandana Shiva's criticism of Western and upper-caste ecological paradigms that leave out those that are already on the outside of their stories of "nature" and "heritage" (Shiva 45).

Roy and Bama's works provide an ethics of care and resistance based on subaltern ecology, which is a method of viewing and living on land that goes against mainstream ideas of purity, beauty, and environmentalism that are based on caste. Their characters don't run away to perfect places; instead, they take back polluted and neglected areas and make them important and meaningful. This new way of thinking is both artistic and political. It opens up the ecocritical conversation to include the voices and places that are most frequently ignored.

Conclusion

Through their books The Ministry of Utmost Happiness and Sangati, Arundhati Roy and Bama provide us a powerful new way to look at ecology from the outside. Both writers move beyond the conventional stories of environmentalism that are based on purity, conservation, and elite aesthetics. Instead, they focus on a subaltern ecological awareness that is based on lived experience, embodied resistance, and relational belonging. The graveyard in Roy's book and the Dalit village in Bama's book are not only places that have been neglected; they are places where marginalised groups fight for their right to live, occupy, and resist.

This work has showed how these texts question and undermine the geographical hierarchies that caste and patriarchy put in place through what may be called "subaltern ecologies." Roy and Bama show how body, land, and justice are all connected in complicated ways. For example, Anjum turns a graveyard into a centre of communal care, while the Dalit women have to deal with harsh circumstances every day. These tales change the way we think about environment from a faraway wilderness to a place where people live and fight for their rights, moulded by history of oppression yet full of agency, dignity, and resistance.

Roy and Bama make us reassess what environmental justice means in India by focussing on the stories of those who have been left out of both environmental and literary discussions in the past. Their work shows that any

meaningful ecological future must first deal with the social, geographical, and physical inequities that exist now. By doing this, they not only broaden the field of ecocriticism, but they also provide us a fundamentally political and moral view of survival and solidarity from the edges.

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