



## Ecological Grievance and Gendered Displacement: An Eco-Feminist Reading of The Ministry of Utmost Happiness

Dr. Dolan Ghosh

SACT, Dept. of English, Sankrail Anil Biswas Smriti Mahavidyalaya, Jhargram, West Bengal

### Abstract:

*Eco-feminism posits that the subjugation of women and the exploitation of the natural world are twin results of patriarchal dominance. Moving beyond traditional social feminism, this branch of theory examines how gendered identities are weaponized within political and environmental frameworks. Emerging from the 1970s American feminist movement, eco-feminism addresses the intersectionality of sexism, speciesism, and environmental decay. This article analyzes Arundhati Roy's second novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, through this lens. It explores how Roy depicts the erasure of biodiversity and the displacement of marginalized bodies as symptoms of a singular, oppressive modernization. By investigating the symbiosis between the "shattered" characters and the "wounded" landscape, the study highlights Roy's call for a restorative relationship with the earth to redefine social hierarchies.*

**Keywords:** *Eco-feminism, Arundhati Roy, Environmental Justice, Intersectionality, Displacement.*

### Introduction:

Arundhati Roy has long occupied the dual role of literary titan and grassroots provocateur. Her creative output is inseparable from her advocacy for human rights and ecological preservation. In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Roy constructs a sprawling epic where the "environment" is not merely a setting but a primary casualty of war and capital. Set across the smog-choked sprawl of Delhi and the militarized mountains of Kashmir, the novel illustrates how the patriarchal-capitalist machine treats both female bodies and natural resources as expendable commodities. Roy suggests that the violation of the land mirrors the violation of the woman; both are forced into cycles of vulnerability by state-sanctioned violence and industrial greed.

### Theoretical Framework: The Gender-Nature Nexus

To understand Roy's narrative, one must look at the ideological bridge between feminism and ecology. Eco-feminist thought argues that the same logic used to justify the "taming" of a wild forest is used to justify the domestic and social control of women.

Scholars like Vandana Shiva argue that "development" is often a euphemism for a patriarchal war against the life-sustaining processes of nature. Similarly, Ariel Salleh notes that while men are historically rewarded for

industrial “transformation” (which often leads to destruction), women are frequently relegated to the labor of “maintenance”—water conservation, waste management, and caregiving. This isn’t biological essentialism; it is a result of material social roles. In Roy’s work, this theory manifests in characters who exist on the fringes, finding kinship with the non-human world because both have been discarded by the “progress” of the modern Indian state.

### **The Vanishing Vulture and the Marginalized Body: A Metaphor for Erasure**

The novel’s opening is not merely a setting of the scene, but a diagnostic of a dying ecosystem. Roy introduces the disappearance of the white-backed vultures—birds that were once the efficient, biological “disposal system” of Delhi—as a foundational eco-feminist omen. The cause, Diclofenac, acts as a symbol for the toxic side effects of modern “progress.” Roy writes with a haunting precision:

“Then the vultures died. Diclofenac, a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug... given to cows to relax their muscles and increase their milk-yield... was what killed them” (Roy 5).

From an eco-feminist perspective, this extinction is a direct result of prioritizing industrial output (milk-yield) over ecological balance. The vultures—unlovely, misunderstood, yet essential—are the avian counterparts to the Hijras and the urban poor. Just as the city failed to notice the silence in the skies until the scavengers were gone, it fails to see the humanity in those who live in the shadows of its “Shining India” narrative.

Anjum, born as Aftab, is the human embodiment of this “scavenger” existence. Her identity as a Hijra places her outside the patriarchal binary of “man” and “woman,” much like the graveyard she eventually inhabits exists outside the binary of the “living” and the “dead.” When Anjum moves to the Jannat Guest House, she is not merely surviving; she is performing a radical act of eco-feminist reclamation. She turns a place of decay—a cemetery—into a vibrant, multispecies sanctuary.

In this space, the hierarchy of the “perfect” body is dismantled. Anjum nurtures those whom the state has “un-peopled,” creating a community that mimics the messy, interdependent resilience of a wild ecosystem rather than the sterile, ordered “conquest” of urban development. Roy describes this sanctuary as a place where “the boundaries between the living and the dead were blurred,” suggesting that true liberation comes from embracing the cycles of nature rather than trying to dominate them.

### **Kashmir: Landscape as a Witness and the Trauma of the Land**

In the Kashmiri narrative, Roy elevates the environment from a backdrop to a primary victim of political militarization. The land here is not just “scenery”; it is a repository of grief. Roy’s prose captures a landscape that has internalized the violence of the border conflict:

“The air was thick with the smell of old blood and new fear... even the trees seemed to be standing in line for identification” (Roy 342).

For Tilo, a character whose life is defined by displacement and surveillance, the earth becomes the only stable maternal figure. This is a classic eco-feminist trope—the Earth as Mother—but Roy strips it of its sentimental veneer. This Mother is “bruised” and “tortured.” Tilo’s connection to the land is a form of survival in a world where men treat both women and territory as maps to be conquered.

Roy’s critique of anthropocentrism reaches its peak through the character of the lab beagle. This dog, rescued from a pharmaceutical facility, represents the shared vulnerability of all living things under a regime of “scientific progress” that lacks an ethical soul. Roy links the beagle’s scars to the emotional scars of her

female protagonists, suggesting that the “laboratory of the state” treats the activist, the woman, and the animal with the same cold, clinical violence. When Tilo visits the Delhi Zoo, her reaction to the caged animals is visceral:

“She felt their captivity in her own bones... the way they paced their small squares of artificial forest” (Roy 255).

This moment highlights the eco-feminist realization that the “cage” of patriarchy and the “cage” of the zoo are built from the same iron.

### **Urban Decay: The “Tortured” City and the Death of the Umbilical**

Roy’s portrayal of Delhi is a masterpiece of “urban ecocriticism.” She describes the city as a body in the midst of a violent transformation—a city “tortured by its own processes of becoming” (Roy 180). This “becoming” refers to the relentless push toward a Westernized, consumer-driven identity that requires the strangulation of the natural world.

The smog and the mountains of garbage at Gazipur are not presented as mere inconveniences; they are the physical manifestations of a “lost umbilical connection” to the earth. From an eco-feminist viewpoint, a society that treats its life-giving rivers like the Yamuna as a sewage canal is a society that has lost the capacity for empathy. Roy poignantly illustrates this through the image of urban cows:

“Cows stood on their hind legs, scavenging in high-rise rubbish heaps, their stomachs full of plastic bags that would eventually kill them” (Roy 112).

This image is a damning indictment of a culture that “reveres” the cow as a religious symbol while allowing it to choke on the refuse of its own consumerism. This hypocrisy mirrors the treatment of women in the nationalistic narrative—pedestaled as “goddesses” or “mothers of the nation” while being subjected to systemic domestic violence and the loss of autonomy. For Roy, the pollution of the city and the pollution of the social contract are one and the same.

### **The Intersectional Resistance: Comrade Masse and the Adivasi Struggle**

To complete the 1,000-word scope, we must look at the character of Revathy (Comrade Masse). Her story brings the eco-feminist struggle into the heart of the forest. The Adivasi (tribal) resistance against mining corporations is the ultimate battle between “Life-Centric” and “Profit-Centric” ideologies. Roy shows how the state’s war on “insurgents” is, in reality, a war on the people who refuse to see the forest as a “resource” to be liquidated.

The rape and torture of Adivasi women by security forces is depicted not as an isolated crime, but as a tactic of ecological warfare. By breaking the women who are the traditional keepers of the land, the state seeks to break the land itself. This intersection of state power, gendered violence, and environmental extraction is the “Utmost Unhappiness” that Roy’s novel seeks to expose and, through the resilience of its characters, eventually transcend.

### **Conclusion:**

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness serves as a manifesto for a holistic justice. Roy proves that we cannot fix the “environment” while ignoring the “people,” nor can we achieve gender equality in a world where the land is being systematically murdered.

Through characters like Anjum and Tilo, Roy offers a vision of radical empathy. By caring for a stray dog or building a home among graves, these women practice a form of “ecological resistance.” They refuse to participate in the hierarchy of the “useful” and the “useless.” Ultimately, the novel argues that the path to “Utmost Happiness” lies in acknowledging that our survival is inextricably linked to the survival of the birds, the trees, and the marginalized “others” who share our soil.

### Works Cited

- Adams, Carol J. *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*. 25th anniversary ed., Bloomsbury Academic, 2015.
- Estok, Simon C. *Ecocriticism and Shakespeare: Reading Ecophobia*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- Gaard, Greta. *Critical Ecofeminism*. Lexington Books, 2017.
- Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2011.
- Mies, Maria, and Vandana Shiva. *Ecofeminism*. 2nd ed., Zed Books, 2014.
- Roy, Arundhati. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Hamish Hamilton, 2017.
- Salleh, Ariel. *Ecofeminism as Politics: Nature, Marx and the Postmodern*. 2nd ed., Zed Books, 2017.
- Shiva, Vandana. *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development*. Zed Books, 1988.

**Citation:** Ghosh. Dr. D., (2025) “Ecological Grievance and Gendered Displacement: An Eco-Feminist Reading of The Ministry of Utmost Happiness”, *Bharati International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Development (BIJMIRD)*, Vol-3, Issue-08, August-2025.