

Examination of Collective Struggle and People's Movements in Arundhati Roy's *My Seditious Heart*

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Cite this paper as: Sunil Dattatraya Alone, Dr. Jobi George (2024) Examination of Collective Struggle and People's Movements in Arundhati Roy's *My Seditious Heart*, Vol.13, No.8, 6606-6609

ABSTRACT

The present research paper examines collective struggle and people's movements in Arundhati Roy's essay collection titled *My Seditious Heart*. The protest is not presented as a single person's action but as a moral and political power of the people by Arundhati Roy. Through her essays on various issues like displacement, development, damage to the environment, state repression, and grassroots-level resistance, the book has meticulously dealt with the defence of marginalized communities for their land, dignified life, and right of abode. The present research paper analyzes the essays of Roy through the perspective of Marxist and cultural theories of class struggle, hegemony, commitment, and ideology. This analysis is based on the theoretical perspectives of the great intellectuals such as Marx, Williams, Eagleton, Althusser, and Agathocleous. The capacity of Roy's writing about turning nonfiction into an observer of political events and solidarity among the people is highlighted through the present research paper. Her essays unveil the disguised nature of violence meted out to tribals, peasants, workers, and activists in the name of their "development". Thus, the present paper aims to analyze Roy's essay collection *My Seditious Heart* as a book of rebellion and a unified conscience of the people.

Keywords: Collective struggle, Injustice, Inequality, Displacement, Resistance, *My Seditious Heart*, Arundhati Roy

INTRODUCTION

The discourse on people's struggle and people-led movements has its own important place in contemporary literature in India, especially in the essays written by Arundhati Roy. *My Seditious Heart*, her collection of essays, has an important role in raising the voices of marginalized people and raises questions against the oppressive system that perpetuates inequality and displacement experienced by these marginalized people. The essays of Roy do not just document the facts; they are also widely recognized for their role as an interventionist in the debates on socio-political issues, which brings literature in line with resistance and discord (Eagleton 8). She is always involved in important movements like the Narmada Bachao Andolan. She, through her essays, has precisely highlighted the challenge posed by grassroots-level unity that openly challenges the narratives of development and nationalism promoted by the dominant people in the country (Roy 64).

The people's collective resistance is rooted in marginalized people's lived experiences of displacement, especially of tribals and rural areas' people. Her essays can be examined in the light of the Marxist theory, significantly influenced by class struggle and various conflicts in society (Marx and Engels 30). At the same time, her essays have the reflection of Raymond Williams's concept of counter-hegemony, wherein alternative voices contest dominant ideological formations (Williams 112). By analyzing her essays in the context of these theories, Roy has given voice to a political solidarity and the practice of ethical ways in the system. Thus, her essays have symbolic significance that the people-led movements cannot be studied in isolation, because these movements are the resistance against injustice meted out to marginalized people by the system.

Collective Struggle and People's Movement:

Arundhati Roy's essay collection titled *My Seditious Heart* deals with the collective struggle and people-led movements in contemporary India. Her essays cannot be confined to the description of resistance; they actively take participation in the rebellions organized for the justice of victimized people. Roy's essays have a political vision that works for the betterment of the marginalized communities, like tribals, displaced peasants, and grassroots-level workers. By doing so, she has used her literary works, i.e. essays, for people's opposition to their

oppression. According to her, her literary works are “not meant as neutral commentary” but as “another stream” flowing into the “immense, rushing currents” of rebellion against the oppressive system (Agathocleous 192). Thus, it takes us to the central argument of this paper that Roy’s essays boldly advocate for the solidarity that precisely redefines writing as a people’s collective action

The issue of displacement, caused by various developmental projects in tribal areas, is at the centre of the essays of Arundhati Roy. According to her, the state-sponsored development projects are executed with hidden motives of the displacement of the marginalized people, like tribals, farmers, and poor people who have been residing in the areas over the years. In her discussion on the severe issue of the Narmada Valley, the loss of tribals is highlighted by her in her essays. She states, “Most of them were Adivasi people who... will lose their lands and homes this monsoon... In a few months they will be destitute and have nowhere to go” (Roy 158). In the aforementioned quote, she has pointed her finger towards the cost that tribals have to pay for the hidden agendas of development run by the state government. She challenges the misleading narrative set by the government that shows the necessity of the projects to achieve the progress of the nation. Roy has bluntly criticized the ideology of the “Greater Common Good,” which argues that this ideology has perpetuated systemic violence against the tribals and other marginalized people. She opines, “Because we’re told that it’s being done for the sake of the Greater Common Good... we believe what it benefits us to believe” (54).

Arundhati Roy’s ideology can be understood from the perspective of Marxism. According to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles” (30). The essays written by her have the illustration of this Marxist ideology by portraying the agenda of development as a source of class conflict in the affected areas. The state government and people from the corporate world are unscrupulous and have misleading motives behind this agenda, while displaced tribals and farmers stand against these people for their rights. Terry Eagleton also proposes his idea about literature’s role in the construction of the ideological superstructure. He argues that literature exposes the discriminatory process of “naturalization of dominant ideas” (Eagleton 4). Her essays do not allow this type of naturalization of the exploitation of tribals, farmers and other marginalized people by unearthing the violence meted out to these groups in the name of their development.

The research paper also shows that Roy doesn’t merely deal with the movements of people to criticism, but her essays also significantly contribute to and advocate for solidarity between marginalized people and the system. She herself was present at the sites of protests organized by the people against their exploitation. She extended her support for movements like the *Narmada Bachao Andolan*. It indicates her commitment to the welfare of society. She states, “I do not even need five minutes to tell you why I’m here... I’m here because I support you” (Roy 158). In the aforementioned quote, her involvement in these movements shows that she always stands with the oppressed people. The concept of “commitment” by Raymond Williams is relevant in this context. He argues that all writing by different authors is a reflection of a particular dark reality of society (Williams 199). Her essays are rooted in grassroots-level struggles of the marginalized people and reject the illusion created regarding neutrality.

The essays written by Arundhati Roy are important in discussing the importance of people’s rebellions against their oppression by the system. She describes, “[V]arious people’s organizations massed into a single organization, and the Narmada Bachao Andolan... was born” (Roy 64). The aforementioned quote illustrates the change in the perspectives of people from the fragmented nature of resistance to unified resistance against their exploitation. According to Marx and Engels, the real strength of workers is in their unity against the system. They said, “The real fruit of their battles lies... in the ever-expanding union of the workers” (41-42). Roy has depicted the idea of mass mobilization through her essays. The unified rebellion can successfully challenge the hegemonic system in society, and it may result in the achievement of the expected outcomes.

Raymond Williams’ concept of hegemony is important in providing insights into Arundhati Roy’s essays. According to him, hegemony is a “lived system of meanings and values” that helps in prevailing dominant system of power (Williams 112). Roy has bluntly criticized the oppressive system that marginalizes the rebellious voices of the people. However, she also illustrates the emergence of movements against this system of hegemony. The united gathering of “more than fifty thousand people... to pledge to fight ‘destructive development’” (Roy 64) is an epitome of this type of resistance against the system. These movements are the biggest challenge to the dominant narrative set by the powerful people.

Roy has portrayed nonviolent resistance through her essays. She reminds us about villagers’ enthusiastic participation and the struggle they made in the civil disobedience movement. She writes, “Each villager had his or her hands bound together... They were beaten, arrested... They just walked back and began all over again” (64). In the aforementioned quote, Roy has discussed people’s faith and their involvement in the Gandhian philosophy of nonviolence as well as their grassroots-level activism against the exploitation meted out to them. At the same time, Roy propagates that nonviolence has its own limitations. She notes, “[...] people believe that faced with extermination they have the right to fight back. By any means necessary” (395). These lines upset the moral basis of resistance, which suggests that violent response is necessary in the worst-levelled condition of exploitation.

Otherwise, the dominating system will continuously suppress the marginalized people for its vested interests.

The theory of ideological and repressive state apparatuses by Louis Althusser helps the researcher to study Roy's essays in the context of this dynamic. He argues, "Class struggle operates across various domains like economic, ideological, and political" (Althusser 43). Roy's essays don't fail to capture the multidimensional exploitation and struggles of the marginalized people. Her essays precisely expose that state institutions not only enforce pseudo-developmental policies but also simultaneously work on altering the perceptions and perspectives of the people. Through her essays, Roy has challenged these manipulative and exploitative narratives of exploitation. Roy prominently focuses on the ideological struggle that paves the way for metamorphic transformation of the entire political system of the nation. In this context, Althusser discussed that ideological resistance is "very far in advance" of overt political conflict (159).

Invisibility and erasure of the identity of the marginalized people are another very important aspect of the essays written by Roy. She observes, "...the millions of displaced people don't exist anymore. When history is written, they won't be in it. Not even as statistics" (Roy 54). In the aforementioned quote, it is shown that the marginalized people are deliberately and systematically excluded from the official histories of the nation. Roy has documented their struggling experiences in her essays and refuted their exclusion from history. She creates an alternative archive of resistance in the form of her essays by documenting their struggles. Kenneth Hewitt's concept of the "endless crisis of normality" is appropriate in this context (35). He describes that the structural inequalities are the biggest barrier for the marginalized people to access basic needs. These issues are systematically delineated in her essays by Roy by visualizing the victimization of these people.

Roy has also criticized the development achieved at the cost of the environment by the government. She raised the issue of cleaning the river Ganges as a part of her grassroots-level environmental activism. These types of her initiatives are the reflection of her concern for environmental and social issues experienced by the tribals and farmers. In her eyes, the degradation of the environment has been disproportionately affecting the marginalized communities and reinforcing and worsening existing inequalities in society. Roy's this perspective is similar to the Marxist ecological idea, in which environmental exploitation is considered as the extended form of capitalist accumulation.

The research paper also analyzes her treatment of emotional aspects, as it is very important for the present research. Raymond Williams concept of "structures of feeling" is also discussed in the context of the lived experiences of the marginalized people (128). Roy has vividly described sufferings, pain, anger, and the resilient nature of victimized people. This type of description of various emotions shows the 'intensity of emotions' of victimized people's movements for their rights. This treatment of the emotional dimension has reinforced the political impact of her essays to a great extent. Tanya Agathocleous opines that Roy's essays is written from "the heart of a crowd," which metamorphically transforms the voice of individual expression into mass resistance against the exploitation (192).

Roy also raises her voice against the role of the state in suppressing the resistance of marginalized people. The law of sedition and other laws are used to brutally silence activists and intellectuals who give voice to the merciless and unlawful marginalization of these people. These types of laws are "brandished as a weapon against free speech" (Agathocleous viii). Roy has her own experiences of legal persecution for the political resistance against the illegitimate activities of the government. Still, she has spread awareness among the people on the necessity of rebellion against their oppression. She argues, "Real political resistance offers no such shortcuts... Real resistance has real consequences. And no salary" (326). The aforementioned quote gives emphasis on the need for ethical commitment for true activism against the marginalization of tribals and peasants.

Roy's essays are relevant at the global level in the context of resistance. She has analyzed the indigenous struggles of tribals, farmers and other marginalized communities within transnational contexts, which highlights the interrelation of global capitalism with these people's movements. The approach discussed in the aforementioned lines is appropriate in the context of the Marxist appeal for solidarity at the international level. The appeal is "WORKING MEN OF ALL COUNTRIES, UNITE!" (Marx and Engels 76). Roy has expanded the scope of the struggle of the masses by linking indigenous movements to the movements organized at the international level.

Moreover, the essays written by Roy are itself the form of resistance against the exploitation of these sufferers. Her essay writing is fragmented, polyvocal, and open-ended in nature. This type of writing structure doesn't encourage passive consumption at all. Instead, it encourages the critical analysis of the issues of victimized. Her essays are a reflection of the harsh realities of society and counter a simple form of narration. Walter Benjamin's concept of the "author as producer" is very relevant in this context (Eagleton 57). Roy has not only produced texts but also reconstructed the conditions of literary production by directly involving herself in various people-led movements and marginalized communities.

CONCLUSION:

The examination and analysis of the present paper prove that Arundhati Roy's *My Seditious Heart* is a significant

text that meticulously delineates the theme of people-led struggle. She has integrated Marxist and other cultural theories to show that a person's writing can be used as a political power to criticize the unscrupulous nature of marginalization of the downtrodden people. Her essays do not just discuss about the displacement of tribals and farmers; they also criticize dominant narratives of development and nationalism misleadingly propagated in various social and political debates. The use of theories of great intellectuals like Raymond Williams and Louis Althusser shows that Roy has constructed a counter-hegemonic discourse for the upliftment of marginalized people. She also questioned the false ideas promoted by the state for its vested interests and gave voice to the voiceless tribals, farmers and workers for their rights. The resistance portrayed through her essays is epic in nature. Her adoption of neutrality while writing her essays results in her significant place within the "heart of a crowd." She also exposes the use of laws like sedition as weapons against intellectuals and activists who raise their voice against the unworthy policies of the government. At the end, the research paper highlights the necessity of ethical courage and acceptance of real consequences without reward for true resistance against the suppression of voices. Thus, *My Seditious Heart* is not just a collection of essays, but a manifesto of conscience for the readers. It stubbornly encourages the need for people-led movements against their exploitation in India. In this way, Roy's seditious heart gives assurance of the dignified existence of rebellions, and it is also a blueprint for solidarity against injustice meted out to the marginalized people by the oppressive system.

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