



A CROSS STUDY OF ARUNDATHI ROY'S THE COST OF LIVING AND GITHA HARIHARAN'S *THE ART OF DYING*

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ABSTRACT

Present study is a cross study of Arundathi Roy's The Cost Of Living and Githa Hariharan's The Art Of Dying. Roy's The Cost of Living is a brilliant work, highlighting the human face of current issues like large dams and nuclear power. As a sensitive, intelligent citizen she talks about government policies without being political. The Cost of Living comprises two essays: The Greater Common Good on the dam project on the Narmada, and the other The End of Imagination on the 1998 nuclear tests. Roy's focus is on government policies, which while claiming to be progressive and democratic, pay no heed to the welfare of the common people. Her anger is directed at the way policies are implemented, the callous attitude of officials, and above all the difference between the claims of the government and the actuality.

Keywords: Art, literature, music, politics, humanism and humanistic concerns.

INTRODUCTION

Isaac Asimov's assertion that art, literature and music are rated among the highest expressions of the human spirit underscores the essential thrust of literature. It also helps to define the term 'humanism' succinctly i.e., the human spirit. All literature concerns itself in one way or another with this spirit of humanity portraying it in all its inherent paradoxes: at its most glorious and most devious, in its highest endeavour and its meanest engagement. Humanism is a prism reflecting the various shades, colours and nuances of humankind. A literary work is

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sincere because it is honest, true to experience and human nature and thus can speak the truth of human experience. Humanism does not necessarily mean didacticism, a kind of propagation of ideal human values. Neither does it confine itself to a kind of literature of protest seeking to draw attention to the condition of the downtrodden or oppressed. Thus, humanism is neither wholly dogmatic nor wholly reformist. Humanism is the portrayal of all elements, of all fibres, which constitute the fabric of life.

Humanism is not a single hypothesis or theorem, and it dwells on no new facts. It is rather a slow shifting in the philosophic perspective, making things appear as from a new center of interest or point of sight¹.

This quote of William James sums up accurately the spirit of humanism. It also shifts the spotlight on two contemporary writers: Arundhati Roy and Githa Hariharan. There is no attempt to make a comparative study of the two. They are yoked together because of the basic spirit, which shines through their work.

The scope of the paper is limited to a reading of two books: Roy's *The Cost of Living* and Hariharan's *The Art of Dying*. Both these books travel on different paths: Roy on activism and protest, Hariharan scaling the landscape of the mind. Yet it is the concern for humanity which illumines both the books. It is this

commonality which brings them together. Roy's *The Cost of Living* is a brilliant work, highlighting the human face of current issues like large dams

and nuclear power. As a sensitive, intelligent citizen she talks about government policies without being political. She makes her stand clear when she vehemently declares that:

I am not a city basher I am not an anti-development junkie, nor a proselytizer for the eternal upholding of custom and tradition. What I am is however curious².

Much like Alice following the White Rabbit into the hole in the tree, Roy finds herself through the looking glass not in Alice's magical world, but finds herself straying into mined territory. Her curiosity leads her to a search for the possibilities of wading through the "congealed morass of hope, anger, information, disinformation, political artifice, engineering ambition, disingenuous socialism, radical activism, bureaucratic subterfuge, misinformed emotionalism"³. The result is a scintillating book in which Roy has brought together moral, philosophical and technical details to "create a mesmerising tale of depredation, deceit and destruction."⁴

The Cost of Living comprises two essays: The Greater Common Good on the dam project on the Narmada, and the other The End of Imagination on the 1998 nuclear tests. Roy's focus is on government policies, which while claiming to be progressive and democratic, pay no heed to the welfare of the common people. Her anger is directed at the way policies are implemented, the callous attitude of officials, and above all the difference between the claims of the government and the actuality. Of the many examples and statistical figures quoted by her, the example of the Bargi dam very eloquently substantiates her point of view. The Bargi dam is one of the first to be operative in the huge Sardar Sarovar Project. It has been functioning since 1990.¹ The government had cited the figure of 70,000 people to be displaced and 101 villages were to be submerged. In reality 114,000 people were displaced and 162 villages submerged. To make matters worse, ten years down the line only 5% of the projected area is irrigated. Roy supports her discontent and protest by studying hard facts and figures such as these. The inability of the government to connect with the people fills her with disgust.

Her essay The End of Imagination paints a horrifying picture of the nuclear tests carried out in the Thar

Desert. Nuclear power is not something to gloat over or boast about. As she, in her inimitable style says,

Thank you for altering the very meaning of life. From now on it is not dying we must fear, but living⁵.

Aware that such a standpoint would be considered blasphemy, she nevertheless does not retract. In fact it only strengthens her resolve to use her talent of writing and restate a case (the destructive nuclear power) because "silence would be indefensible." Paradoxically, all the rave reviews and celebration of India's

entry into the Big League as a nuclear power, and Pakistan's entry at about the same time, highlights the inability of the countries to grasp at the true nature of nuclear weapons. The common man is completely overlooked and he does not have even the remotest idea about radiation, nuclear winter, or any other spin off of nuclear power. Her summary of the power and the glib reason of deterrence are blown to bits in the following words. Nuclear power, she says, is:

Man's challenge to God. We have the power to destroy everything that you have created. This world of ours is four thousand six hundred million years old. It could end in an afternoon⁶.

The short sentence standing alone emphasises the world of horror and the absolute power of destruction of which the common man is blissfully unaware and the government refuses to highlight Answering a query on the nature of her protest she said;

I am talking about the politics of development, of how do you break down this completely centralized undemocratic process of decision making? How do you make sure it is decentralized and that people have control over their lives and heir natural resources?⁷

It is this fundamental issue which separates her humanism from a mere protest to an informed polemic. She has walked with the protestors, seen their plight and understood the bleakness of their future. In fact she has courted arrest and faced the snide remarks of her critics. Her active participation adds an incisive quality to her perspective. She exhorts the readers to at least make an attempt to understand the enormity of what is happening around them so that they are informed of the imminent changes in their lives brought about by politics and policies. Knowing that she has the power of the storyteller, she sets herself the task of telling the story of real situations, inverting Marianne Moore's definition of poetry as reflecting real toads in imaginary gardens. Her toads and gardens are as real as can be. For her, fiction is truth, and, to use her words:

Fiction is the truest thing that ever was. The writer is the midwife of understanding. It's very important for me to tell politics like a story to make it real, to draw a link between a man with his child and what fruit he had in the village before he was kicked out⁸.

Even in *The God of Small Things* her humanism is evident. Here too, the smallest things lead to bigger effects, the smallest dent made by the baby spider on the surface of the water connects with the world. In *The Cost of Living Ammu* and *Velutha* of *The God of Small Things*, give way to nameless, faceless labourers digging trenches at night to lay fibre optic cables. They do so by the light of a small candle! The absurdity makes one sit up and take note and one realises that most of humanity is unprotected and "the world and the social machine intrudes into the smallest deepest core of their being and changes their life."⁹

By giving voice to and empathizing with the 'other' people Roy has laid the foundation for seeking the greater common good of the human race, and indeed the living world. In an essay titled "The Power Within" Shashi Deshpande elucidates on the art of writing. She says,

All good writing is socially committed writing, as it comes out of a concern for the human predicament. I believe, as Camus says, that the greatness of an artist is measured by the balance the writer maintains between the values of creation and the values of humanity.... Writing that probes with honesty and artistry into the human situation."¹⁰



The above lines neatly sum up the credo of Roy's humanistic writing.

From truth which is told like fiction to fiction that is told like truth. Githa Hariharan's *The Art of Dying and Other Stories* is a slim volume of brilliantly etched stories. The twenty odd stories cover a whole range of contemporary life showcasing the common man's dreams and aspirations, highs and lows, laughter and sorrow. The vivid imagery and the lucid prose add to the sense of immediacy of each story. She captures the very nuances, the incandescent glow of each individual. The technique is of allowing each character to take over the narration. Nowhere does one feel the presence of the omniscient author. One telling example is the story, *Voices in the Twilight*. The story is ostensibly about recently orphaned siblings. The two sisters and a brother have come together for the funeral rites of their mother. Through a skilful use of the stream-of-consciousness technique, Hariharan offers a ringside view of each individual. The only common thread binding the three has snapped. Instead of coming closer, and bonding with each

other they squabble and wonder how soon they can escape from the flat to their chosen lives. There is a strong echo of the Eliotian *Wasteland*, where all communication fails, and memory only stirs up gloom and misery. The starkness of the scene is blinding. Their dead mother does not bring back carefree

innocence of childhood, only the gloom and sorrow of their widowed mother bringing up her brood single-handedly. The three symbolise the lost, isolated individuals swallowed up by the gargantuan city. The three traverse different paths to forge an identity: Vidya in a stolid bank job, Shakuntala in a wealthy marriage, and Arjun looking for emotional security in short lived relationships. They know that their present lives are just a chimera. Their vulnerability is only proof of their endeavours to forge a meaningful existence. It is Arjun who exemplifies the essential human need when he goes to meet Rita slyly aware that she is forbidden territory. She who lives all alone in a swarming chawl, enveloped in the fetid air understands that "fear is sometimes stronger than desire"¹¹ and holds him as she would a frightened child. It is for this understanding that Arjun turns to her, the lifeline of his floundering, meaningless existence Hariharan reiterates the power of compassion as the magic which can transform the most ordinary into the most luminous. It can also escape the clutches of the "loving tarantula" the city with its beady wandering eyes.

Gajar Halwa focuses on one Perumayee. She is part of the millions of cheap migrant labourers who come to the city in search of work, leaving behind a home, a village, a whole way of life. The mechanical movement of her arms reflects the movement of her mind back and forth, present to the past. We get a glimpse of the life she has left behind, the drought, failure of crops, lack of other means of livelihood. Paradoxically the highway cutting through the village does not bring any succour; it only leads them to life of mindless drudgery, turning

them into faceless nameless masses. As Perumayee observes that the queues in the big city are no different than the queues of her village. There they were for water, here for

milk! The bland tone of the speaker only highlights the deadening sameness. But the city is going to swallow her, symbolised by her desire to buy a shining blue sweater like the other girls working in the colony. Her future is foretold. Like the gajar halwa she is cooking she will be sucked down into the morass of life just as the carrots absorb all the various ingredients turning into one gooey sticky mass.

Perumayee represents the millions of nameless voiceless people who constitute an important part of the concrete jungle. They are the ones who in Roy's *The Cost of Living* lay down the fibre optic cables. They are the ones who pay dearly the cost for the urban elite's comfort.

The title story of the collection, *The Art of Dying*, finds the protagonist face to face with death - a brother collapsing on his own examining table and her mother dying a slow death, dying of unidentified causes. She herself is a therapist by profession healing people, reaching out to their core of uncertainties to bring them back to normalcy. Death is not something physical, it is "a face devoid of emotion, the muscles free of expectation, movement tension, life" ¹²

In this story there is a strong element of the grotesque. The various people seeking help at the counselling center do not even realize anything abnormal or dramatic governing their lives. As the narrator says:

The real challenge is what lies closer to normalcy, separated from it by a swift and subtle twist." ¹³

One such case is the one about the mother-daughter. The devoted mother wanting to help her daughter, a medical student, overcome her fear of blood, washes and bathes her without showing any revulsion at the sight of stale blood. But then she also washes her daughter's spotless white coat every single night! The action draws out the reader from a state of complacency, and is able to visualise the characters and transform them from a dry impersonal data of a case study into living, breathing human beings. Hariharan succeeds in vividly portraying the "sore spots" in each one of us. Very graphically she shows the "untidy nest of unacknowledged needs, impulses, drives and instincts (that) lies hidden in the heart of every human being." ¹⁴

In this collection of stories Hariharan wins over the reader by her narrative ability and life-like characters in life-like situations. The ability of man to overcome or at least endeavour to overcome fears and doubts is the key to her appeal. It is her humanism, which helps to sensitise the reader and make him see deep

within himself to achieve an understanding of the others.

Mulk Raj Anand, the doyen of humanistic literature, averred that art was an illuminating factor in human experience and poetry was a powerful medium through which one could think humanly. Both, Roy and Hariharan, validate this assertion. Their writing is a testimony to the fact that,

We all have slumbering realms of sensibility,
which can be coaxed into wakefulness by books.¹⁵

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