

Ecofeminist and Postcolonial Critiques of 'Development' in Vandana Shiva's *Staying Alive* and Arundhati Roy's *The Greater Common Good*

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ABSTRACT

Indian women writers critique development as a gendered, caste-inflected, and ecologically exploitative process. Their works expose the myth of neutral progress, interrogate the state's complicity in displacement and violence, and advocate for alternative, inclusive, and sustainable models of growth. These critiques are crucial in understanding how "development" functions not as a universal good but as a contested terrain, where power, gender, and resistance are in constant negotiation. Arundhati Roy, in her essay *The Greater Common Good* (1999), critiques the displacement caused by dam projects like the Sardar Sarovar Dam, showing how the state's developmental ambitions devastate the lives of tribal communities. Her work interrogates the idea that development serves the "greater common good," revealing how this notion marginalizes those who bear its burden. Similarly, Vandana Shiva, in *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* (1988), critiques development as patriarchal and neo-colonial, arguing that it marginalizes both women and ecological systems. She celebrates women's traditional ecological knowledge as central to sustainable living. This paper tries to address the intersecting themes and ecofeminist perspectives in both of their writings.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Developmental Projects, Sustainability

The critique of development by Indian women writers has emerged as a significant literary and intellectual intervention against dominant narratives of modernity, nationalism, and progress. These writers question the patriarchal, exclusionary, and ecologically destructive aspects of state-sponsored development in India. Their critiques appear across genres—novels, essays, poetry, and memoirs—and are informed by perspectives such as feminism, ecofeminism, subaltern studies, postcolonialism, and Dalit and Adivasi activism.

Indian women writers often portray development not as empowerment but as dispossession—especially for women, Dalits, Adivasis, and the rural poor. For instance, Mahasweta Devi depicts the impact of state projects on Adivasi populations in her stories such as "*Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha*", where the state's indifference to tribal suffering underlines the dehumanizing effects of industrial modernity. Many Indian women writers employ ecofeminist perspectives, linking the exploitation of nature with the oppression of women, especially in rural and indigenous contexts. Indian women writers explore how development deepens gender inequality, often by erasing women's labor, restricting access to natural resources, and exacerbating domestic burdens. Several Indian women writers critique the narrative of national progress which justifies violence against the margins in the name of modernity. For instance, Githa Hariharan in *In Times of Siege*, critiques how cultural and intellectual development projects can also be co-opted by majoritarian or authoritarian state ideologies. Similarly, Meena Kandasamy, in her poetry and novels like *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014), critiques the state's indifference to agrarian distress and rural violence, exposing the failure of development to reach India's most vulnerable communities.

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Vandana Shiva's *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* (1988) constitutes a foundational text in the field of ecofeminism. It offers a rigorous critique of dominant Western paradigms of science, development, and economics through the lens of feminist ecological thought. Shiva argues that contemporary models of development, particularly those shaped by Western industrial and patriarchal ideologies, are inherently exploitative—contributing to the degradation of the environment and the marginalization of women. In contrast, she valorizes traditional knowledge systems maintained by women in the Global South, which are embedded in ecological balance, cultural diversity, and the ethics of care and interdependence (Shiva, 1988).

Shiva introduces the "subsistence perspective," a framework that recognizes the life-sustaining labor often performed by women—labor that remains unaccounted for within the formal economy. She contends that mainstream economic thought systematically erases this productivity because it is not aligned with profit-oriented metrics, thereby rendering women's contributions invisible (Shiva, 1988). Furthermore, she interprets development as a continuation of colonial logic, particularly visible in projects like the Green Revolution in India, which resulted in the loss of biodiversity, soil fertility, and traditional agricultural autonomy. These transformations, according to Shiva, displaced women from their ecological roles and accelerated environmental degradation.

Central to Shiva's critique is a denunciation of the dominant scientific paradigm, which she characterizes as reductionist, mechanistic, and patriarchal. This paradigm, she argues, has historically dismissed indigenous and experiential knowledge systems—especially those associated with women and rural communities. Shiva positions these alternative epistemologies as inherently holistic and ecologically grounded, challenging the conventional notions of productivity and efficiency embedded in capitalist development models. She asserts that women's involvement in seed preservation, sustainable agriculture, and water management is vital to ecological resilience and community well-being (Shiva, 1988).

Shiva's broader analysis calls for the reclamation of what she terms the "feminine principle"—not as an essentialist biological trait but as an ethical and cultural orientation toward care, reciprocity, and environmental stewardship. She argues that sustainable development must be grounded in the recognition of women's ecological wisdom and their central role in sustaining both human and natural systems. In this way, *Staying Alive* serves as both a political critique and a visionary manifesto for an alternative development paradigm rooted in equity and sustainability.

Similarly, Arundhati Roy's essay *The Greater Common Good* (1999) offers a scathing critique of India's development discourse, particularly through an examination of large dam projects such as the Narmada Valley Development Project (NVDP). Roy interrogates the phrase "the greater common good," exposing its ideological function in justifying infrastructural megaprojects that benefit urban elites while displacing rural, poor, and tribal communities. She contends that this rhetoric conceals systemic violence enacted upon those who are rendered voiceless in the planning and execution of such projects (Roy, 1999).

Roy begins by documenting the extensive displacement caused by the Sardar Sarovar Dam, describing submerged villages, destroyed ecosystems, and dispossessed communities. She criticizes the government's failure to adhere to constitutional safeguards and judicial mandates concerning rehabilitation and resettlement. For Roy, the dam becomes a symbol of the state's technocratic ambition and disregard for democratic accountability. She describes how the affected populations are often labelled as anti-national for resisting displacement, and how their resistance is frequently met with legal and political suppression (Roy, 1999).

The essay blends investigative reporting with personal narrative, as Roy recounts her interactions with activists from the Narmada Bachao Andolan and tribal villagers whose lives are inextricably linked to the land. She exposes the complicity of institutions such as the judiciary and the World Bank in legitimizing these displacements, thereby illustrating how development is intertwined with global finance and domestic authoritarianism. Roy ultimately challenges readers to reconsider the ethical implications of development, arguing that no amount of technological advancement can justify the human suffering it imposes (Roy, 1999). Roy's prose, characterized by its rhetorical irony and moral urgency, functions as a form of resistance. While she does not explicitly frame her critique within feminist theory, her attention to the lived experiences of vulnerable populations—especially indigenous communities—resonates with feminist ethics of care and

justice. Her use of language, narrative, and metaphor serves to dismantle dominant discourses that obscure the realities of ecological and social dispossession.

Despite differing disciplinary orientations—Shiva drawing from scientific and ecofeminist traditions and Roy from literature and activism—both authors articulate a common critique of the dominant development paradigm in postcolonial India. They reveal how the ideology of “progress” marginalizes the rural poor, displaces indigenous communities, and depletes ecological systems.

Intersecting Themes

One of the central intersections in the works of Shiva and Roy is their critique of mainstream development models. Both authors interrogate the Indian state’s reliance on centralized, technocratic, and large-scale interventions such as dams and monocultures. Shiva critiques these practices as expressions of neo-colonialism, which erode biodiversity and dispossess small-scale farmers—particularly women (Shiva, 1988). Roy, similarly, positions the Sardar Sarovar Dam as emblematic of a development model that prioritizes elite interests at the expense of indigenous livelihoods (Roy, 1999).

A second shared theme is the concern with displacement and marginalization. Roy draws attention to the forced eviction of millions without adequate rehabilitation, characterizing them as “refugee citizens of an unacknowledged war” (Roy, 1999). Shiva, likewise, argues that women in subsistence economies are disproportionately affected by environmental destruction due to their direct dependence on natural resources. Both authors reveal how the discourse of the “greater common good” serves to silence those excluded from its benefits.

Ecological degradation constitutes another critical intersection. Shiva critiques industrial agriculture, mining, and dam-building for their role in disrupting ecological equilibrium and reducing biodiversity (Shiva, 1988). Roy complements this by highlighting how the damming of rivers leads to forest submergence, land loss, and irreversible environmental harm (Roy, 1999). Both authors emphasize the ethical imperative to integrate ecological sustainability into development policy. Moreover, both Shiva and Roy privilege indigenous and local knowledge systems over technocratic expertise. Shiva foregrounds the ecological knowledge held by women in rural communities, critiquing Western science as reductive and patriarchal (Shiva, 1988). Roy underscores how tribal communities possess an intimate understanding of their ecosystems, which is dismissed by decision-makers who operate from removed bureaucratic centers (Roy, 1999). This epistemological conflict—between local wisdom and centralized authority—is central to both texts.

In their critique of power and institutional complicity, both authors expose the state’s role in perpetuating violence through policy, judicial decisions, and development narratives. Roy describes how the judiciary and media often legitimize displacement in the name of progress (Roy, 1999), while Shiva critiques institutional support for global capitalist interests that devalue subsistence economies (Shiva, 1988). Both portray state violence as structural, normalized, and often invisible. Although Roy does not explicitly write within a feminist framework, both authors employ a feminist ethical perspective rooted in empathy, care, and social justice. Shiva’s ecofeminism directly links patriarchal oppression to environmental exploitation, emphasizing the devaluation of women’s labor and knowledge (Shiva, 1988). Roy’s attention to the human toll of development, particularly on tribal women and children, reflects a similar ethical stance.

Finally, both authors use narrative as a tool of resistance. Roy’s lyrical, provocative prose disrupts official narratives and invites critical reflection (Roy, 1999). Shiva’s accessible yet incisive writing challenges scientific and economic jargon, opening space for alternative discourses grounded in lived experience and ecological integrity (Shiva, 1988). In both works, language becomes a means of reclaiming voice and agency for the silenced.

CONCLUSION

Through *Staying Alive* and *The Greater Common Good*, Vandana Shiva and Arundhati Roy offer a compelling indictment of India’s prevailing development paradigm. They expose the intertwined nature of ecological devastation, social injustice, and institutional complicity, while foregrounding the resilience and knowledge of marginalized communities. Their works advocate for a reimagining of progress—one rooted not in domination and dispossession but in sustainability, equity, and the ethical coexistence of human and non-human life.

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