

Arundhati Roy's Non-Fiction:

Examining Its Discourse

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Abstract:

Arundhati Roy, a representative writer of the present time has identified herself with non-fiction immediately after Booker Prize winning lone novel *The God of Small Things*. She began to try and understand the endless conflict between power and powerlessness, which has remained the central theme of much of her writings. Roy is one of the most consistent writers who has not changed her beliefs, ideas and faith. She has only changed the forms of writing by telling the story in different ways. From exposing the nefarious designs of controlling the hearts and minds of the people, and the will of governments across the globe that informs the functioning of US imperialism, to hammering at the conspiracy of dispossessing the naturally lawful owners of lands and resources in the tribal areas through the bogie of Naxalism, from shattering the self-righteous patriotic myths about Kashmir to unrelenting war against monopolization of wealth in the private sector under the garb of neo-liberalism and globalization are the themes that Roy has selected. It requires the clarity of thought and expression in equal measure which is evident in the course of examining its discourse.

Key words: environment, globalisation, capitalism, monopolisation, imperialism

TEXT: The emergence of women novelists in India has considerably influenced the change in the attitude of the patriarchal society. These, women writers have, very effectively, portrayed the female psyche — her problems, her suffering and finally her emancipation. Women writers like Toru Dutt, Rama Mehta, Jai Nimbkar, Githa Hariharan and Arundhati

Roy are remarkable for their portrayal of an evolving woman. They project the urges, dreams, desires and limitations of a woman giving her a new image.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* reveals her commitment to the present world as she perceives it and convinces the reader of her belief system. She analyses the relationship of individuals and the society, the rational and irrational elements in human psyche. Through her prolific work she has acquired a reputation as one of the most intelligent by differentiating of contemporary English novelists. Her reputation rested primarily on her status as a committed realist writer. Her non-fictions are equally significant and draw the attention of readers.

Roy thinks that in this age of corporate globalization, neo-imperialism and neo-liberalization, when most of the people in the world fight a daily battle against hunger, thirst, and the violation of their dignity, a writer should use their skills, imagination and art "to recreate the rhythms of the endless crisis of normality, and in doing so, expose the policies and processes that make ordinary things—food, water, shelter, and dignity—such a distant dream for ordinary people" (*An Ordinary Person's Guide* 106-107). She asserts that a writer should understand and expose the instruments and apparatus of the State. In this time of urgency, a writer should share the experiences of the masses and give voice to their feelings and thoughts

Roy is a voice of the devoiced. She uses her skill, imagination, resources and time to expose and unmask the veiled bestial face of the imperialists, capitalists, and even of the state. Her sole aim is to make the powerless and the exploited aware of the injustices done to them by the powerful. To achieve this objective, she writes political essays which, she thinks, are easily accessible and credible to the masses, because people read political essays as facts based on relevant and actual data and statistics. This is the reason that pushes Roy towards the writing of political essays.

The problems India is reeling under, such as the burden of colonized psyche of postcolonial elites, disparity between masters and slaves, owners and workers, suppression, oppression and exploitation of the marginalized and misuse of state machinery to subdue the weak, are not critically discussed as the main concerns which Roy wants to highlight. Here Roy realizes the futility of her efforts. This is a reason that has kept her away from writing another piece of fiction, although she got worldwide fame and wealth for this novel. After the booker, she was offered many lucrative deals from big publishers for writing another novel, but she turned them down. She chooses small, independent publishers, like South End Press,

that run non-profitable business. Fame and wealth never attract her, and here lies the difference between Roy and most of the diasporic writers who line up for big publishers. "Failure attracts my curiosity as a writer. Loss, grief, brokenness, failure, the ability to find happiness in the saddest things—these are the things that interest me." (*The Shape* 75)

After *The God of Small Things*, Roy again turned to write non-fiction which she thinks a more comprehensible and easily accessible form of literature to expose the dangerous policies, plans, instruments, strategies of neo-imperialism such as neo-liberalism and globalization designed by the postcolonial native rulers and the neo-imperial and capitalist countries such as the United States, Britain, Israel and others. Roy talks about the exploitation of the powerless at the national and transnational level. It is hardly possible to incorporate in a novel all these facts which are thoroughly researched.

Presently India is teetering on the brink of civil war. The majority of the people in India are facing a number of problems because of the government's wrong policies, and a civil unrest among its people is throttling the progress of the country. In *The End of Imagination*,¹ she passionately and vehemently expresses her outrage against the testing of nuclear bombs at Pokhran in 1998 by the BJP-led Central Government. She asserts that it was a kind of fascist and totalitarian attitude of the government that tried to persuade the people that the testing of nuclear bombs was a singular achievement and a matter of national pride. She expresses her concerns for the jingoistic nationalism prevalent among the people. She tries to make the people aware by pointing out the devastating aftermath of the nuclear test. She also exposes the irrelevance and ineffectiveness of the theory of deterrence, political expedience, and "Exposing Western Hypocrisy" on the basis of which Indian government tried to achieve consensus of the people for nuclear test. She thinks that India's intention to be a part of the club of Super Powers by testing nuclear bombs was not only fallacious but also ridiculous. "The article is an ideological statement, lucidly presented with an abundance of parody, irony and at times biting sarcasm....The most fascinating part of this article is her beguiling, captivating prose."²

In 'The Greater Common Good'³ and 'The Road to Harsud', Roy expresses her deep concern for the construction of Big Dams. In these essays, she says that India takes ideology of development as an excuse for capitalist expansion by dispossessing, dislocating and repressing the weak of the nation, especially the dalits and tribals. She assails the Government of India for its development policies of building dams, and the World Bank and Indian Supreme Court for their assistance and support without regarding the scientific studies

on the social, economic and ecological impact of dams. The postcolonial ruling natives reduce poor people, dalits and tribals to mere postcolonial subalterns who are the victims of the decision made by their own government. These two essays are the result of Roy's study of the data on social, environmental and economic impact of dams and her own experiences. Here Roy attends to the basic principle of what Timothy Morton terms "the ecological thought": a belief that "everything is connected."⁴ The painful episode of this developmental project is that millions of people are displaced and dispossessed without any proper rehabilitation and compensation. Roy sees the ray of hope in the resistance movement being carried out all over India against the construction of dams under the leadership of Medha Patkar. This movement forced the government and the World Bank to set up commissions to review the human cost and environmental impact of big dams. Anne Maxwell justifies her stand arguing that writers like Roy often value indigenous cultures "purely for what they can contribute to contemporary environmental debates and practices."⁵

Her short essay "*The Ladies Have Feelings, So Shall We Leave It to the Experts?*" appeared in *The Cost of Living*⁶ was Roy's first explicit engagement with politics surrounding climate change. In addressing to environmental concerns, she argues, "Painters, writers, actors, dancers, filmmakers, musicians are meant to fly, to push at the frontiers, to worry the edges of the human imagination, to conjure beauty from the most unexpected things." (5)

Indian poor, dalits and tribals are the real victims of globalization, neo-liberalization and free market economy. Roy's depiction of the plight of the tribals in India in her essays '*Mr. Chidambaram's War*' and '*Walking with the Comrades*'⁷ exposes the deplorable conditions of the colonized Indians in post-colonial India. She holds the Government responsible for most of the tribals' joining, supporting and sympathizing with the Maoists, because the Maoists assist them in their struggle for existence, when they are deprived of the basic elements of life — safe drinking water, electricity, education, healthcare, legal redress, and even dignity and identity of a man. The Government and the corporations in the name of free-market and national-interest dislocate the tribals from the mineral rich lands by the brutal police and military force through killing, raping and driving them away. Roy's concern is the negligence and lack of good intention of the Government to solve the Maoist problem through discussion, negotiation, and understanding the root cause of their outrage.

In '*Azadi*', '*Democracy's Failing Light*', '*How Deep Shall We Dig*' and some other essays, she talks about the problems prevailing in the states of the north-east and Kashmir, www.ijellh.com

and Indian Government's responsibility for it. They are imagined communities who are marginalized in every sphere of life. It shows the failure of the postcolonial project of creating a unified India. She vehemently expresses her outrage against the implementation of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act. In the name of killing the militants, the army personnel with the power of this act kill thousands of innocent ordinary people and label them as terrorists, gangsters, or insurgents. The condition in Kashmir and the north-eastern states indicates the complete failure of Indian democracy.

India is inflicted with the dual assault of communal neo-fascism and neo-liberal capitalism, and the poor and religious minorities are the worst sufferers of these assaults. While the Congress government brought neo-liberal capitalism to India, the BJP practised communal fascism as an electoral strategy to come to the power. With this agenda the BJP came to power in 1998, and it committed genocide in 2002 in Gujarat by killing 2000 and displacing 1,50,000 Muslims. Muslims have been systematically marginalized socially, culturally, economically, and even politically. The neo-fascism's brutal and bestial face was exposed, when the programme was justified by the then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee as part of the retaliation by outraged Hindus against Muslim terrorists (*The Algebra* 265). She also reminds the people of the Congress government's horrific past with three thousands Sikhs butchered in Delhi in 1984, just after the assassination of Indira Gandhi. She criticizes the enactment of Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA).

Neo-liberal capitalism strangulates the poor in India. It is a part of American neo-imperialism which has the policy of privatization of national resources such as lands, mountains, minerals, water, electricity, education, healthcare at its core. Neo-liberal capitalism is nurtured by International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and Inter-American Development bank. In a nutshell, the joint force of American-imperialism and the native government consigns the life of the people of Third World countries into darkness and uncertainty. Roy's remark is very realistic when she says that the neo-liberal markets make a business strategy that the First World needs to sell and the Third World needs to buy.

Roy exposes the hidden ugly face of American-imperialism, neo-colonialism and its strategy of globalization to overcome its unprecedented and ever-deepening economic crisis and to retain its military supremacy. Her dealing with international issues mainly focuses on how American-imperialism with intrigue, assassinations, aggressions, blockades, sanctions and invasion colonizes weak nations. She reveals that America through the CIA, and with the help of other capitalist countries has committed massacre and genocide in almost all the

developing and underdeveloped countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. She brings the painful histories of US invasion of South Vietnam, North Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Afghanistan, and more recently, Iraq.

America with the co-operation of World Trade Organization, World Bank and International Monetary Fund carries out its strategy of globalization, privatization and liberalization to suck the last drop of blood from the impoverished and poor people of underdeveloped countries. She unveils to the world how America with the largest state debt and economic hollowness and millions of jobless citizens is desperate to revamp its sagging economy by selling and clearing the stock of arms and ammunitions and by the contract of reconstruction works after the wars, and by capturing the rich oil reserves in the Middle-East. She says that Afghanistan war was waged with an eye to open up and control a corridor to the oil reserves of Central Asia, and war on Iraq had the intention to establish domination over the vast oil reserves of Iraq. Roy thinks that 9/11 was a self-made excuse of America to launch its 'War on Terror' to fulfil its objectives in Afghanistan and Iraq. Roy brings data to prove that 9/11 was the sudden outburst of accumulated rage of many decades against American atrocities all over the world. She describes the painful history of how the state of Israel was formed unlawfully and how it, with the help and support of America, indulges in inhuman treatment and torture of the Palestinian people.

In '*An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire*'⁸, 'Instant-Mix Imperial Democracy (buy one, get one free)', 'Peace and the New Corporate Liberation Theology', she shows how American neo-liberalization and neo-colonization bulldozed an ancient civilization (Iraq) into dust. She says that Iraq is the "logical culmination of the process of corporate globalization, in which neo-colonialism and neo-liberalism have fused" (*An Ordinary Person's Guide* 334). The logic of Operation Iraqi Freedom that was designed with an excuse of Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction was baseless. Before the invasion, the UN's chief weapons inspectors had given a clean chit to Saddam Hussein on that count. America retained its fascist colour by disrespecting the protest of millions of people all over the world against the invasion of Iraq.

Roy's biography may suggest that she has kept flitting between different fields, from architecture to political writing, to cinema to fiction and back to political writing, but a close reading of her writings clearly indicates that the themes of all her writings reflect her political bent of mind. To her an architectural thesis, a film script, a novel, a political essay are various ways of expressing an evolving political vision. In the foreword of *In Which Annie Gives It*

Those Ones, she says that right from the time of her studying architecture or even earlier, the political way of looking at the world began. From that time she began to try and understand the endless conflict between power and powerlessness, which has remained the central theme of much of her writings, fiction and non-fiction alike. Asked about the stylistic change in an interview with Howard Zinn, she suggests that “Fiction and non-fiction are only different techniques of storytelling. For reasons I do not fully understand, fiction dances out of me. Non-fiction is wrenched out by the aching, broken world I wake up to every morning.”⁹ So Roy is one of the most consistent writers who has not changed her beliefs, ideas and faith. She has only changed the forms of writing, or, in other words, she tells the story in different ways. Roy’s migration is intellectual, noble and honest to serve the cause of the marginalized. She is bold enough to face the consequences of telling the truth.

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