

## Arundhati Roy's Power Talk: A Study of Her Essays

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Over the last decade there have been a number of people taking to the arena of writing but the name that has surfaced as an able writer amid the huge clutter of writers is none other than Arundhati Roy. She is the novelist who jumped headlong into the political arena. She's a keen observer and has her fingers on the vibrating pulse of the contemporary political scenario. She captures articulately and confidently; the happenings and mishappenings and is, undoubtedly, bold and brave enough to speak to the concerned, looking straight into the eyes. She is a campaigner in the anti-globalised world and is really furious. Really, really angry and her anger is mostly justified.

It is difficult to understand the profound, yet scrappy, impact of Roy's political writing and activism unless one recalls the dizzy euphoria of her arrival and the irony of the journey she picked for herself afterwards. Roy was first announced to the world by a breathless article in a leading Indian magazine. The year was 1996. Liberalization of the Indian Economy was just five years old. A jubilant middle class was looking for a mascot. Arundhati Roy came tailor-made from heaven:

**“She had an elfin beauty, a diamond flash in her nose, a mane of gorgeous hair, a romantic back-story, and a manuscript that crackled with heart and scintillating prose and had triggered an international bidding war. India loved her.”** (Chaudhary, From Princess to ..., Wiki Pedia).

From the very moment *'The God of Small Things'* was published, Roy was deemed the chosen one. As the successes of the book piled up, it was a done deal. Arundhati Roy was India's triumphant entry on the global stage; she was the princess at the ball. No one could have estimated that the lady would topsy-turvy the entire scene. But that is what Arundhati Roy did. In May 1998, barely a few months into the rollercoaster ride of her Booker win, Roy wrote *'The End of Imagination'*; an angry impassioned critique of the bomb testing in Pokhran. She wrote:

**“There can be nothing more humiliating for a writer of fiction to have to do than restate a case that has, over the years, already been made by other people in other parts of the world, and made passionately, eloquently and knowledgeably. But I am prepared to grovel...because, in the circumstances, silence would be indefensible.”** (Roy, *The End of Imagination*, 04).

Since *'The End of Imagination'*, there has never been a silence from Roy. It was the first in a series of essays that grew in moral strength and clarity, moving from the somewhat over-emotional hyperbole of the nuclear piece to the clear-eyed discomfitures of her later ones. She has dangerously crossed over to the dark side. With each counter narrative she has written, in fact, Roy has set herself more askance from India's wishful idea of itself. At each step, she has

rejected the shoe that would allow her to slip back into a make-believe world. Instead she has steadfastly worked at growing into her ideal: expressing love through critical vigilance.

Roy has grappled with all the big issues of overt: big dams, displacement, power project, industrialization, privatization, globalization, terrorism, US imperialism, Hindutva nationalism, Kashmir and, most recently, the Maoist insurgency. Roy has had a thesis that has gathered more and more evidential truth. She is unique with this caliber as her forte. It's not acquired, her bravery is inborn. She says:

**“Who the hell has conducted those opinion polls? Who the hell is the Prime Minister to decide whose finger will be on the nuclear button that could turn everything we love—our earth, our skies, our mountains, our Plains, our rivers, our cities and villages—to ash in an instant? Who the hell is he to reassure us that there will be no accidents? How does he know? Why should we trust him?”**(Roy, *The End of Imagination*, 40).

Roy's writings carry immense weight in this morally confusing time. Powerful like dynamite—ready to explode—is the maxim that goes with her without hesitation. Arundhati Roy is a 'Thrilling Political Icon' who represents the coming of Age of feminism. With a novelists' eye for the power of symbolism and the activists' understanding of the purpose of principle, Roy succeeds in deeply embarrassing the Indian state's much vaunted pride as the world's biggest democracy. What has made Roy endlessly fascinating to the Western media is her shrewd understanding of how big subjects like nuclear bombs, dams, corporate power and democracy can be communicated to a huge new international audience? In part, it is a straight forward matter of applying her skill as a novelist, bringing wit and an eye for the telling detail to abstruse issues such as irrigation or electricity distribution and producing compelling political essays which are both witty and horrifying.

Roy discusses terrorism and the US government's role against it. She sternly attacks President Bush for his unattainable goal to 'rid the world of evil doers'. One of the most influential quotes is '*terrorism is the symptom, not the disease*'. She writes:

**“It's absurd for the US government to even toy with the notion that it can stamp out terrorism with more violence and oppression. Terrorism is the symptom, not the disease. Terrorism has no country. It's transnational, as global as enterprise, as Coke or Pepsi or Nike. At the first sign of trouble, terrorists can pull up stakes and move their 'factories' from country to country in search of a better deal. Just like the multinationals.”** (Roy, *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*, 233).

She criticizes President Bush for his open declaration—'*either you are with us or you are with the terrorists*'—and calls it a piece of presumptuous arrogance. Roy marshals data but she writes with passion and a love of language. In short, she argues like a novelist. Her writings will surely jar some readers. This is not a sterile tale, and the author uses staccato sentences and even essentially the power of life and death. Roy seems worried that writers will see her as 'aligned' and therefore shallow and uncool; and that political activists will see her as an ivory tower

intellectual who has no right to speak on such issues. She wants to defend her right to be fiction writer while still being able to speak out on political issues. She adds:

**“My thesis is that I’ve been saddled with this double-barreled appellation, this awful professional label, not because my work is political but because in my essay, I take sides. I take a position. I have a point of view. What’s worse, I make it clear that I think it’s right and moral to take that position and what’s even worse, use everything in my power to flagrantly solicit support for that position.”** (Roy, *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*, 197).

As the United States pushed for war on Iraq, Arundhati Roy, the internationally acclaimed author addressed issues of democracy and dissent, racism and empire, and war and peace in her essay entitled ‘*War Talk*’. The eloquent, passionate, and political insight of Roy’s political essays has added legions of readers to those already existing. ‘*War Talk*’ highlights the global rise of religious and racial violence. From the horrific pogrom against Muslims in Gujarat, India, to United States’ demands for war on Iraq, Roy confronts the call to militarism. Desperately working against the backdrop of the nuclear recklessness between her homeland and Pakistan, she calls into question the equation of nation and ethnicity. The writer Alice Walker has said that the fierceness with which she loves humanity moves her heart and Paul Hawken in *Wired Magazine* has written that if Roy continues to upset the globalization applecart like a Tom Paine pamphleteer, she will either be greatly honoured or thrown in jail. In fact she was jailed in March 2002, when India’s Supreme Court found Roy in contempt of the court after months of attempting to silence her criticism of the government and recently; she has the charge of ‘sedition’ to her credit.

‘*War Talk*’ is indeed, a book to be read, a breathing to be felt. Written by Roy between May 2002 and 2003, she writes against the background of threatened nuclear war with Pakistan and the rise of the fascism in India, the spectra looming large in the foreground is that of Bush, the imminent war with Iraq and the never ending ‘war on terror’. Reading this essay is acumen to being blasted by a hot wind of anger. Roy admits in one of her essays that she doesn’t understand the reason why fiction dances out of her and non-fiction is wrenched out by the aching, broken world she wakes up to every morning. Roy rages against this broken world, against the poverty and war, against the horrific attacks on Muslims in India and the mechanization of the multinational corporations. She is eloquently scathing about the Indian government, and Bush and Blair, but also confronts questions of nationalism, empire, and how we fight for real democracy.

In the essay, ‘*Come September*’, Roy takes the attacks on the World Trade Centre on 11 September 2001 as her starting point but then moves on to talk about Chile, Palestine and Sanctions on Iraq, and finally gives a no-holds-barred commentary on the way that the free market and its institutions undermine democracy itself. She says:

**“Though it might appear otherwise, my writing is not really about nations and histories, it’s about power. About the paranoia and ruthlessness of power.”** (Roy, *Come September*, 14).

The essay brings forth the eerie reality of September. It's not the month in which only America has faced the brutal injury but none September since 1922 till 2002 has passed without being injured.

Along with the anger in 'War Talk', there is also tremendous optimism. In such grassroots campaigns, along with the anti-globalization and anti-war movements, Roy sees the possibility of building another world free of war, poverty and oppression. In reporting on the rise of fascism in India, she foresees the world barbarism that will result if we fail to fight for our new world. In 'Come September' she goes a step ahead by pointing at America and saying, 'what goes ahead comes back. It is one's own deed for which a person or a nation suffers'. Roy's conscience has turned its attention to the real world, turning her into an electrifying political essayist. At least, one feels honestly that there exists somebody who has the grit to speak the heart. She's entirely far-fetched from those coy writers who lack the power to speak truth. The essay is a serious thesis on globalization, imperialism and war, which has gripped the entire world creating despair. The script is well researched, informative and extremely readable. A book that makes the readers rage against the system and want it to get active. She definitely has the ability to instill her courage in others. She assures her readers with comforting words and says:

**“Another world is not only possible; she's on her way... I can hear her breathing.”** (Roy, Come.....44).

In May 2003, Roy delivered a speech entitled 'Instant Mix Imperial Democracy (Buy one, Get one Free)' at the Riverside Church in New York City. In it she described the United States as a global empire that reserves the right to bomb any of its subjects at any time, deriving its legitimacy directly from God. The speech was an indictment of the actions relating to the Iraq war. In June 2005, she took part in the world Tribunal on Iraq. In March 2006, Roy criticized US President George W. Bush's visit to India calling him a 'war criminal'. She writes about America's vengeance quite liberally:

**“Television tells us that Iraq has been 'liberated' and that Afghanistan is well on its way to becoming a paradise for women... In reality, Iraq's infrastructure has been destroyed and its cities devastated by a complete administrative breakdown... Meanwhile, Afghanistan has lapsed into the Pre-Taliban era of anarchy, and its territory has been carved up into fiefdoms by hostile warlords”.** (Roy, Instant-mix Imperial Democracy, 149)

Roy is least scared of criticism and charges, had she been scared she wouldn't have written on such a controversial topic. In her afore mentioned collection of essays she takes a hard look at the underbelly of the world's largest democracy. The book combines brilliant political insight and razor sharp prose. Beginning with the state-backed killing of Muslims in Gujarat in 2002, she writes about how 'progress' and genocide have historically gone hand in hand; about the murky investigations into the 2001 attack on the Indian Parliament; about the dangers of an increasingly powerful and entirely unaccountable judiciary; and about the collusion between large corporations, the government and the mainstream media. The collection ends with an account of the August 2008 uprising in Kashmir and an analysis of the November 2008 attacks on Mumbai.

As it tracks the fault lines that threaten to destroy India's precarious future, *'Listening to Grasshopper'* asks fundamental questions about democracy, a political system that has, by virtue of being considered *'the best available option'*, been put beyond doubt and correction. The question that largely looms over the entire text is - *'what happens once democracy has been used up? When it has been hollowed out and emptied of meaning?'* In her essay entitled *'Democracy: Who's She When She's at Home?'* She comments on the pogrom in Gujarat and the *'deliberate, systematic attempt to destroy the economic base of the Muslim community'* (5). The entire essay is so full of fiery comments that its pages seem to burn making it hard to handle. They pierce deep into the heart and have the power to melt the hardest of stony hearts. The genocide in Gujarat is most shameful act which requires deep probing.

Her suggestion to the problem is to address this issue and come up with a systematic solution, as she can clearly see through the *'fire in the ducts'* (18). In an opinion piece for *'The Guardian'* (13 Dec., 2008) Roy argued that the November 2008 Mumbai attacks cannot be seen in isolation, but must be understood in the content of wider issues in the region's history and society such as widespread poverty, the partition of India, which Roy calls *'Britain's final parting kick to us'*, the atrocities committed during the 2002 Gujarat violence, and the ongoing conflict in Kashmir. Despite this call for context, Roy states clearly in the article that she believes *'nothing can justify terrorism'* and calls it a heartless ideology. Roy warns against war with Pakistan, arguing that:

**“It is hard to pin down the provenance of a terrorists' strike and isolate it within the borders of a single nation state, and that war could lead to the descent of the whole region into chaos”.** (Roy, Democracy who's.....,18).

The latest violence, as evidenced quite recently in Mumbai, in Kashmir and in various other parts of the nation, gives credence to the argument that terrorism cannot be stopped, cannot be contained, unless the states which wish to declare war on it first give it up as a tactic to maintain control.. The sort of religious animosity that provides the ideological facade for non-aligned or state-sponsored terrorist atrocities cannot be curbed with the anti-terrorism laws or more militarism. It is contained by addressing the root causes of the problems, the very real grievances, and material deprivation which lodges itself in the heart of the politically, economically, and socially marginalized sectors of society.

Way before the Indian state declared an open war on its own people; Roy had seen the contours of the war coming. She once told a friend, *'Sometimes I can't sleep at night with worry. I see all the dots joining'*. What the joined dots were telling her was that Indian democracy had reduced to a shell. In an introduction to her book, *'Listening to the Grasshoppers'*, Roy questions, *'what happens once democracy has been used up?'*

This intuitive question underlies all of Arundhati Roy's political writings. And, in a curious way, the story of that writing itself and India's ambivalent response to it is an indication of what happens when democracy is used up: *'You get a country made up of two continents—moneyed and poor'*. Seers are never comforting people. And no-one can ever accuse Arundhati Roy of being comforting. Over the last decade, she has been there first at almost every trench-line, illuminating, dissecting, warning, presaging, and taunting the cozy out of their towers, magnifying the fights of the voiceless. No other contemporary Indian writer—perhaps no Indian

writer before—has engaged so fiercely and urgently with the idea and reality of India. And none have taken it apart as unflinchingly.

In keeping with the conflicted nature of India, this has earned Roy curious returns: huge love and huge anger. Few years ago, for instance, India was convulsed by a gruesome terror attack that has come to be known as ‘Mumbai 26/11’. Swimming against the tide, Roy had condemned the incident stridently. Every conflict on the ground today bears this thesis out. In Niyamgirhi in Orissa, the Kondh Tribal (or adivasi) people have been fighting the giant Corporation Vedanta against the forcible takeover of their land for bauxite factory. In Singur and Nandigram in Bengal, farmers have fought to protect their land from Tata and the Indonesia—based Salim Group. But nothing bears her thesis out more soundly than the Maoist crisis.

Pitched battles are breaking out across the country: some violent, some non-violent. Arundhati Roy hasn’t said anything wrong or startlingly new. She’s intelligent, forthright, hasn’t sold out and doesn’t trip head over heels to offer sound bites on outdated trivia.

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