

## “Globalizing Dissent” – A Political and Structural study of Arundhati Roy’s selected works

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<b>Article History:</b>  <b>Received:</b> 10 July, 2020 <b>Accepted:</b> 01 Jan, 2021	<b>ABSTRACT</b>  The present paper looks into the socio-political structure of Arundhati Roy’s works. No doubt, she is a queen of dissent as far as the social issue and the political opinion is concerned. It has not only been divulged out of her prestigious style of writing in her novels but in every word, she speaks we can discern her purity of ideals about human life. Her slogan “Globalizing Dissent” has been spoken of and written about widely, but in this paper her dissent and the justification of it can be related to the current situation in India. The disagreement would not be more appropriately enhanced and expressed than in the present political upheaval in the Land of many religions and gods. Starting from the God of Small Things to the Ministry of Utmost Happiness we find the journey is towards the same destination and i.e., the assertion of human rights. Her writings are a type of word-war against the world where there is injustice and inequality. In this present paper we will discuss in depth the political truths of Roy’s some selected works.  <b>Key Words:</b> Dissent, Injustice, Inequality, Globalizing, Socio-political
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### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1 An Activist – Arundhati Roy

**“I stand by what I said. I am prepared to suffer the consequences”**

Global political upheavals are enough source for accumulating evidences of socio-political degeneration. As the situations escalate writers having felt - responsibility come forward to express the efficacy or inefficacy of rules and policies implemented for so called betterment and welfare for the society. World over, pen pictures of the social issues are projected to change the ages old format of social structure. At some places they

are heard as an effective antidote and wholesome structural changes are brought about. But at some the voice of the writer gradually becomes the voice of the masses, when it is ignored by whom it is intended for.

Arundhati Roy is such a voice. She is being heard and heard so loud, but those who should hear and take action are turning deaf to it. Suzanna Arundhati Roy (born 24 November 1961) is an Indian author best known for her novel *The God of Small Things* (1997), which won the Man Booker Prize for Fiction in 1997 and became the biggest-selling book by a non-expatriate Indian author.

After “*The God of Small Things*” made her a global star, the novelist turned to political writing and activism. Her “*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*” is an expression of all her feelings about the marginal community in India. She said, “I believe in the power of narrative. Intrinsically, I am a storyteller. So as soon as I went to the Narmada valley [where 250,000 people were displaced for a dam], I knew that it had a story. That valley had a story that needed to be told differently from the way stories about childhood and identity and caste are told...I learned a lesson soon after the massacre in 2002 of Muslims, when 2,000 people were slaughtered on the streets. I wrote about it and I thought that just describing what happened was a form of politics. To say: “This happened, these people were killed.” But people just turn around and say: “So what? They deserve it.” And you realize that compassion is never going to be a major guiding rule in this. Similarly, what I see happening now with this rabid fear of immigrants, it gains traction. And how do you manage it?” (Roy, Arundhati Roy: 'I don't want to become an interpreter of the east to the west', 2019).

## **1.2 Roy’s Political Sensitivity**

Roy’s pen has become a magic wand to turn the real-life stories into real life narratives with just one abracadabra. She felt the pain of those living in dilapidated conditions. Thus, looking at her emotions towards human life, she has rightly turned to

political writing. Her words portray the wrong doings towards the marginalized community, thus her every word seems to tell a full story of pain and agony.

In 2002 Roy referring to Narendra Modi wrote that if you are a staunch butcher or like to be a genocidist, with the label of being a politician too, you are optimistic then, and has a reason to it. She boldly referred to Modi, a then chief minister of Gujrat, who over looked anti-Muslim riots that killed more than 1000 people. About the latest elections of India Roy does not agree with the results. She fears more massacre with “brazen message of Hindu supremacy”. Though Modi is not named in Roy’s second now “The Ministry of Utmost Happiness” (2017), but the whole book is haunted by the minister’s Hindu vision. At one place she said, “I should not say this, perhaps but if a novel can have an enemy, then the enemy of this novel is the idea of “One Nation, One Religion, One Language”. And this is the slogan of Hindutva Ideology of Modi (Earle, 2019).

Roy never wanted to be, “some pretty woman who wrote a book”, from fiction to the demanding political reality, neither she wants to be the ambassador of India promoting culture and new emergence of India of 21st century. Rather she is known as more a political activist than a novelist. She was imprisoned for sedition, she joined Maoists in India. She expresses those harsh experiences in her non-fiction master piece, “My Seditious Heart” (Schgal, 2017).

Roy’s political ideals were revealed in 1994, when she reviewed critically the film *Bandit Queen* by Shekhar Kapur. She objected on filming a woman by saying, “The Great Indian Rape Trick” and asked vehemently if before restaging the rape of a woman who is still living, did he get permission from her. She thought it was exploitation of Phoolan Devi and her life, presented in a distorted way (News, 2002).

*The God of Small Things* does not happen by chance, it’s not just a fictional narrative rather every scene is symbolic. Even more so when we look at *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, the characters present the fictional form of Hindutva doctrine. Roy’s

political thoughts trail a long struggle in past before adding these masterpieces into the history of literature.

Since “The God of Small Things”, 1997, she dedicated her time mostly on political activities and non-fiction writing, as we mostly find in her essays about social life and causes. She also appears before us as a spokesperson of the Anti-Globalization, criticizing U.S. Foreign policy. She vehemently opposes Indian Nuclear Programs and massive industrialization calling it “encrypted with genocidal potential” (Roy, 2009).

In an interview in August 2008 to The Times of India, Roy articulated openly her support for the Struggle of Kashmiri people. She stated that Kashmir should be given independence. She supported the “massive protest and demonstrations” in Srinagar part of Jammu and Kashmir. She was criticized upon this action by the Indian Government ruling party (Agencies, 2010).

We must not forget that Roy also participated with Medha Patkar, in a campaign against the construction of Narmada Dam. She expressed the change of site for the dam saying that half a million families would be displaced with no compensation at all (Roy, 1999). She even donated her Booker Prize money and the royalties of books on the project “Narmada Bachao Andolan”. In the same sequence in 2002 she appeared in Franny Armstrong’s Drowned Out, a real time documentary on the project (IMBD). She was severely criticized by BJP leaders in Gujarat by saying that she was “Maligning Gujarat” (Correspondant, 2003). When she refused to take back her words, she was sentenced to one day “symbolic” imprisonment and was fined Rs. 2500 (Sethi, 2002).

Ramachandra Guha, an Environmental Historian, while criticizing Roy’s protest, acknowledged her “courage and commitment” for the cause. Roy in reply to Guha’s comments, “Ms. Roy’s tendency to exaggerate and simplify, view of the world, has given a bad name to the environmentalists”, said "I am hysterical. I'm screaming from the bloody rooftops. And he and his smug little club are going 'Shhhh... you'll wake the neighbors!' I

want to wake the neighbors, that's my whole point. I want everybody to open their eyes" (Ram, 2001). Roy had a strong stance upon the demand of alternative plan of construction site.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 “The Fascinating Mess”**

Arundhati Roy, as a political activist has created a mess for the administration but for the reader it is a fascinating mess. When she took the Booker Prize in 1997 for “The God of Small Things”, she plunged head down into her dream for which she herself say, “I’d pay a heavy price”. That was to indulge in putting things right. Though she was “compared to Faulkner and García Márquez”. An Indian writer, said that Roy’s criticism of USA was, “vain, shrill, unoriginal, over simplified, hyperbolic and lacking any voices but her own” (Nan, 2001). Though the same writer calls her rebellious for the sake of rebellious, and said she should not be in opposition. She herself said that her relationship with the authorities is adversarial genetically. She felt obsessed with power and powerlessness simultaneously, against those who have the power and in favor of those who are being crushed under the powerful.

Fahimeh Nazari and Hossein Pirnajmuddin write about Roy in their essay, “Revisiting Colonial Legacy in Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things”, that the book in itself is a post-coloniality, it is a historiography, the main focus is on the gender treatment, on the cast system and culture lapses in Indian society. They further say that Roy in an epic style narrated through the child perspective the Indian post- independence social structure clutched by the Hindu prejudiced traditions and the globalization. The whole of India has shrunk into the Southern Indian State of Kerala, from 1960s to 1990s, with society that is replete with economic and racial discriminations and who are the scapegoats – The “Untouchables” (Nazari & Pirnajmuddin, 2013).

In 2005 Tickell declared in his review of the *God of Small things*, “fifty years after the independence, India seems to be struggling still, with the legacy of colonialism, which show the failure of Administration. It is still clutched in the paws of caste system, mimicry of colonial socio-political structure, and patriarchal traditions. Despite the fact, that there is the impact of colonialism upon Roy’s characters, they still challenge this heritage and try to break free from the social and religious boundaries, by indulging in inter-racial marriages, cross-cast affairs and the transgressive sexuality. She portrays the relationship between power and powerlessness. Thus, in this whole effort there is Roy’s attempt to subvert the hierarchy of power. There is class “antagonism” and “exploitation”, the full exposure of Injustice and Tyranny the Untouchables have to face without any genuine reason. “The insult and abuse the women of the society had to tolerate” (Tickell, 2005).

According to Innes, Roy tests the possibility of a “negotiation of Cultures, Races and Sexes, while remaining in the cauldron of intrinsic paradoxical and discriminatory practices. However, the account of events in *The God of Small things*, is not overtly optimistic. The Pickle factory of “Paradise, Pickles and Preserves, by the end, metaphorically signifies the “preservation of diverse histories, and mingling memories” (Innes, 2007).

Golam Gaus Al-Quaderi and Muhammad Saiful Islam (2011), claim in their article “Complicity and resistance: Women in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*”, that Roy has inaugurated a career of Activism and Resistance against the Global and Local Inequalities in India. The novel portrays the predicament of women living in Indian soil in its deeper aspects. As well as the plight of Dalits is detailed with precision and justice to the subject. Roy looks at the resistance against the oppressed not for the sake of instigating violence. But she presents the true picture of Administration to the world by voicing her dissent. The Variants are articulated by the examination of the intergender relations and marital relations of Ammu, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma and Rahel. These transgressions

question the basic social structure and the acclaimed “Love Laws” of the society. Thus, Roy instigates the Indian females to resist local as well as Global Inequities (Islam, 2011).

Thus, *The God of Small Things*, portray women as Subalterns, who try to change the society by resistance. But they don’t have the voice to claim their rights, as other members of the society do have in India. These women pose resistance against the inequalities to the gender. They try to question the structure of gender, caste and class system, explicitly as well as implicitly, consciously as well as unconsciously but wholeheartedly. (Islam, 2011).

About the women, Sushen & Ganesh in their paper “Marginalization of Women in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*” (2013) say that the concept of marginalization of women is taken to the next level by Roy in her works. Marginal people are politically, socially, legally as well as economically deprived of their lawful rights, as member or as human being in the present social structure. If we look at the history, women are considered more a marginal faction in the male dominated society. Roy in her book portrays three generations of women, taking this idea. The struggle for existence is what Roy presents beautifully as well as awe-fully. The stunning story of women in the society is to bring awareness of the problem females go through. Roy skillfully puts forth women, who are the victims of violence, alienation, exploitation as well as exile. The female protagonist of the novel violates the “love laws “constituted by “ages old casteists”. She suffers banishment by the family, and by the end of the tale she is found dead-alone in the grimy room in a lodge at the age of thirty-one. Thus, Roy truly reflects the plight of the marginal women in the Indian society. She puts in the flag of change, not only in the political system but also the change of the mindset of the masses (Jadhav, 2013).

According to Sonia, Roy criticizes the hypocritic moral code of the society. She exposes the double standards regarding gender. In the *The God of Small Things*, same is reiterated. Chacko was sent to study abroad but Ammu was not allowed to go, because she was a woman and she had no right to go to the college, it was an unnecessary expense for

a girl. Roy, a great supporter of rights of Dalit and the women, highlights those “unnoticed shades of the social issues, which are never noticed by the eyes of the social scientists”. Even religion fails to get the due status for the marginal social members. Irrespective of religious affiliation the underdogs remain as fallen as ever in the dog-eat-dog society:

“When the British came to Malabar, a number of Paravans... converted to Christianity and joined the Anglican church to escape the scourge of untouchability...it did not take them long to realize that they had jumped from the frying pain into fire they were made to have separate churches, with separate services, and separate priests. After independence they found they were not titled to any Government benefits like job reservation or bank loans at low interest rates, because officially, on paper, they were Christians, and therefore Casteless.” (Sonia, 2013).

## **2.2 Recording the Subaltern – Saga**

Roy, a prolific activist-writer, understands full the flows of time. Her yet another novel, a literary masterpiece, *A Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, continues to deal with contemporary issues of today’s India. The community of eunuchs for example, the rise of Hindutva, the Kashmiri demonstrations, the caste discrimination, the effects of globalization on society in general as well as the rapid industrialization, are some of the hand-picked topics of the new adventure by Roy (Monaco, 2018).

The novel is a mixture of political issue as well as the literary allusions, “it encapsulates the rapidly transforming face of Indian democracy with the rise of Right-Wing Political ideology, the degenerating conditions of the marginalized people, the atrocities in the Kashmir Valley (Mohsin, 2017). According to Baldick, the nature of allusions is not fully explained by Roy, rather she relies on the reader’s capable understanding of what she has mentioned (Baldick, 2015). But amazingly though the novel does not give the allusions mentioning the exact events, the reader is conscious enough to understand what is being talked or hinted about.

After twenty years of *The God of Small Things*, Roy hits again. She took the major incidents that happened in India and insinuating them she wants to make people realize that the system has become dilapidated now. It needs a top-down change, if humans are to give space for breathing. The political overtones are very obvious in the novel. This document, implicitly criticize the whole suffocating atmosphere of Indian Politics. Narendra Modi Government is quite latently criticized by the writer. “A writer always takes liberty in delineating the socio-political condition of a place about which she intends to write and in doing so she may either demean or overstate any issue.” Roy has done exactly the same in the novel. She reiterates that the harmony of the state is in danger under Modi’s government. As a free to express her ideals, Roy used her freedom of speech to its full extent and made wonderful political allusions to present her purpose (Maurya, 2019).

Looked deeply we find Roy’s understanding of the contemporary Indian society is as a “bewildering kaleidoscope of perspectives”. Her stories move forwards and backwards in the trails of time. Her works incorporate the letters, government documents and the political pamphlets. It connects from third person to the first for exposing the viewpoint of only one character. She authenticates the characters by their own spoken words and the history attached to them in the shadow.

But “single chronology” sometimes leaves the reader with a sense of helplessness, and bewildered at the sequential viewpoints. Both the novels *The God of Small Things* as well as *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* witness a political commentary through the prism of family’s downfall. Roy spends a great deal of time on the “backwards plot”, filling in the details of major and minor characters’ pasts, but the “forwards plot” that happens when they meet each other is surprisingly slight. The ending is meant to represent a humanist vision of the marginalized finding healing by working together, but this comes at the expense of the characters’ experiencing any conflict with each other or the outside world (Collins, 2017).

“Dying became just another way of living” with “the ongoing grind of inhumane poverty.”

### 3. Conclusion - The Dissent

*“How come we sit back and complacently take all this? I mean this extravagant spending when people are getting thinner by the day and our children are debilitated for life. Spend a million pounds sterling and show the whole world who we really are”.*

“Radical Change” cannot be negotiated by the present government or any government, it can only be brought by the power of masses. Groups of people who disagree with the concept of empire. They are a mindset who select their opposition to the governments and their institutions. They stand against the empire. Empires use these groups of people – the public with a range of “calling cards”. For poor people in many countries, Empire does not always appear in the form of cruise missiles and tanks, as it has in Iraq or Afghanistan or Vietnam. It appears in their lives in very local avatars—losing their jobs, being sent unpayable electricity bills, having their water supply cut, being evicted from their homes and uprooted from their land (Roy, 2017).

Until quite recently, it was sometimes difficult for people to see themselves as victims of Empire. But now, local struggles have begun to see their role with increasing clarity. However grand it might sound, the fact is, they are confronting Empire in their own, very different ways. Differently in Iraq, in South Africa, in India, in Argentina, and differently, for that matter, on the streets of Europe and the United States. This is the beginning of real globalization. The globalization of dissent.

Meanwhile, the rift between rich and poor is being driven deeper, and the battle to control the world’s resources intensifies. Economic colonialism through formal military aggression is staging a comeback (Roy, 2017).

Roy always preferred not to attend literary festivals, for the undertone of these festivals is that a writer should appease the reader and not give awareness. She said that it was very unfortunate that a writer is expected not to understand the injustices of the society.

She should only entertain by spreading a sense of utopia and not awaken the people to their true rights.

Unlike many writers at home, Roy broke a boundary between non-fiction and fiction, and jumped into the unmoored rage of protest for all the inequalities she is sensitive to. She never cared for the awards, and distinction, writing has a purpose for her now, to expose the unjust world. Roy brought awareness to the readers, to understand the undertones of dirty politics and fight for self-righteousness. Roy’s imagination does not flow from the utopia, rather she cherry-picks the events of great impact from the social canvas and augments the situation by her words. Which seem to flow out of the extreme sensitivity of the heart.

What she calls as Globalizing Dissent, is what we need to awake in ourselves. The general public should understand what play is being staged to dupe them. They are willingly being thrown away into the fire which would in the end turn every human aspiration into ashes.

***“Yeah man, I’m angry,” she said. “I’m shouting from the rooftops. What do you mean you want me to be? Reasonable?”***

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