

# **LANGUAGE IN INDIA**

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## **Reading Arundhati Roy's Fiction *The God of Small Things* Through Her Non-Fiction**

**Seema Rana, M.Phil.**

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Arundhati Roy  
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### Writing – A Weapon in Arundhati's Hands

After the great success of *The God of Small Things* and following her Booker win, Arundhati Roy has spent the last decade in writing non-fiction and championing activism as a social and environmental activist. She has become a global dissenter against repression and globalization and a vehement critic of neo-imperialism and of the global policies of the United States. Her non-fiction works include *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*, *Power Politics*, *War Talk*, *An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire* and *The Shape of the Beast*.

Though she now admits that she dislikes the restrictions of writing political polemics, she also says that after winning the prize, she entered into the arena of political Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) 240

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activism. She knew that she had the platform to say serious things about her country. Since then, writing has become a weapon for her.

### **Activism through Fiction and Non-fiction**

In Arundhati Roy, we can see the glimmering, serious writer of *The God of Small Things* and the fierce, incisive activist, writing the non-fiction.

In her non-fiction, she criticizes India's nuclear weapons policies and the approach to industrialization and rapid development as currently being practiced in India. She has campaigned against the Narmada Dam Project saying that the dam will displace half a million people with little or no compensation. It will just provide limited benefits to a limited number of people. In response to India's testing of nuclear weapons in Pokhran (Rajasthan), Roy wrote *The End of Imagination*, a critique of the Indian Government's nuclear policies. It was published in her collection of essays – *The Cost of Living*, in which she also crusaded against India's massive hydro-electric dam projects.

She says that if there is a nuclear war, our foe will be the Earth herself. The devastation will be indiscriminate. She fears that when nuclear technology goes on the market, not just the government but anybody can have their private arsenal. There will be a new world order. She is fundamentally opposed to violence and believes that war cannot eradicate terrorism.

She condemns rising religious fundamentalism in India. Her book *War Talk*, highlights the global rise of militarism and religious and racial violence.

In *Power Politics*, Arundhati Roy challenges the idea that only a few important people can express their views on such urgent matters as the globalization of the world economy, the privatization of India's power supply by U.S. based energy companies and the construction of huge dams that will dislocate hundreds of thousands of people. It is a satire on the government and the political policies. It portrays the pathetic plight of a large number of suffers of the big dam projects.

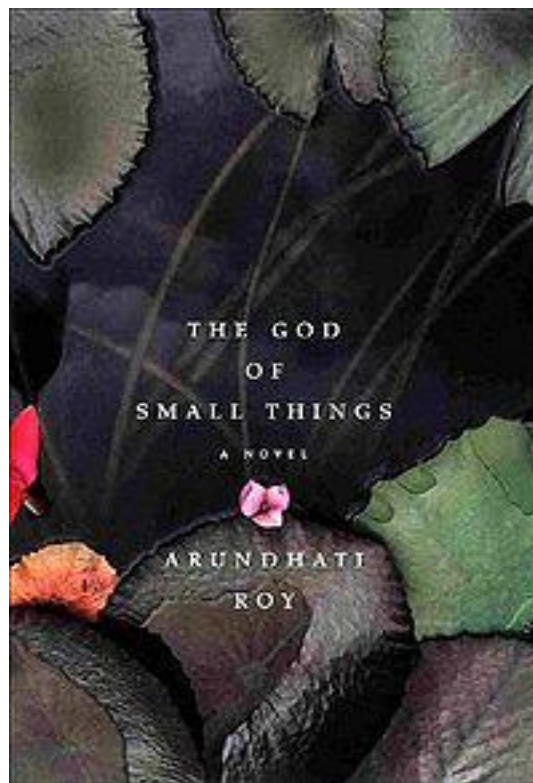
She has demonstrated against construction of the dam both in the Narmada Valley and globally in an effort to heighten awareness and obtain support for the cause.

Roy's concern for the environment and for the people inhabiting it permeates her life, the social conscience that she exhibits is reflected into the literature that she produces as a concrete embodiment of this concern.

In her book of essays, *An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire*, Roy deconstructs the concepts of empire, neo-liberal capitalism, growing threat of corporate power and state terrorism. She also talks about the response of the nation states to resistance-movements, caste and communal politics in India and the perverse machinery of an increasingly corporatized mass media.

Arundhati Roy in her book, *The Shape of the Beast*, talks about the necessity of taking a stand and also of guarding the private space needed for writing in a world that demands urgent intervention.

### *The God of Small Things*



Arundhati questions our attitudes, our ability to tolerate the wrong things and to accept everything. It is important to note that in her novel, *The God of Small Things* also she makes the individuals question and act against the laws that had rigidly remained there for so long. But cultural forces would have their say over the individuals breaking the set rules. The story provides a glimpse of the men in power.

She has given voice to the suffering and oppression of have-nots, at the hands of those who have power and machinery.

In *The Shape of the Beast*, it is obvious that the beast is a political beast. In the interviews included in this book, Roy talks about the hegemonies of State, religion, imperialism, corporate power, social constructs, anti -communism and the shape that resistance movements are taking.

### ***The Shape of the Beast***

She writes in *The Shape of the Beast*:

Deep at the heart of the horror of what's going on lies the caste system; this layered, horizontally divided society with no vertical bolts, no glue, no intermarriage, no social mingling; no human-humane interaction that holds the layers together. So when the bottom half of society simply shears off and falls away, it happens silently (2 p).

Similarly, it is the vulnerability of the poor, the low-caste, the children and the women that lies at the heart of her novel's tragedy. Indian history and political realities shape the storyline of the novel in a variety of ways. The novel also examines the historical roots of these realities and develops profound insights into the ways in which human desperation and desire emerge from the confines of a caste-ridden society.

Roy reveals a complex class conflict in the State of Kerala and its various competing forces. She exposes the brutal and systematic oppression at work in Kerala, exemplified by figures of power such as Inspector Thomas Mathew.

In *The Shape of the Beast*, she comments that in Kerala even among the Syrian Christians, caste issues are found. Most of the leaders of the communist parties are from the upper castes.

When they fight elections, candidates are carefully chosen to represent the dominant caste of their respective 'vote-bank' – an example of how communism will harness the traditional caste system in its quest for power in a 'representative' democracy (31p).

On the other hand, the first thing E.M.S. Namboodiripad did when he came to power as head of the first democratically elected communist government in the world, was to get Birla, the big industrial group, to set up a huge rayon factory in Calicut (32p).

In the last thirty years that factory has destroyed the bamboo forest, poisoned the Chaliyar river and polluted the air. There is a high incidence of cancer among the local people and the factory workers. In the name of employing 3,000 people it destroyed the livelihood of thousands who lived on these natural resources; fishermen, bamboo workers, sand quarriers. The government and courts did nothing about it. Eventually the factory closed down on its own because it had finished off all the raw material there and wanted to move elsewhere (32p).

In the same extract, she talks about inheritance law.

The Churches had will-making classes. They taught fathers how to disinherit their daughters. It's a very strange kind of oppression that happens there (33p).

### **Activist Face of *The God of Small Things***

In her novel, **The God of Small Things**, Velutha, Ammu, Rahel, Estha, all labourers and women in the factory are unfortunate and in one way or another marginalized. Roy has given expression to the sufferings of these people, their oppression at the hands of powerful who dispense injustice.

The problems of patriarchal domination and female subalternity are rooted in the specific cultural reality of Ayemenem, in Kerala. Pappachi and Chacko represent male hegemony. They are created out of the peculiar post colonial situation that prevailed in Kerala; in the fifties and sixties. Pappachi is a typical member of an upper middle class Christian family. The novelist sarcastically comments on the imperialist postures of the family.

“They were a family of Anglophiles pointed in the wrong direction, trapped outside, their own history, and unable to retrace their steps because their footprints had been swept away” (52p).

Pappachi seems to be one of those post-independence Indian urban elites who has not understood the difference between being English and being Anglicized.

The degenerate social system in Kerala that denied property rights to Christian women and prevented them from getting equal rights with men has wronged Ammu too. Though Ammu did as much work as Chacko but everything belonged to Chacko legally in the male dominated society. Ammu as a daughter had no claim. Chacko affirmed strongly:

“What’s yours is mine and what’s mine is also mine.” He always referred to it as “my factory, my pineapples, my pickles.” Ultimately Ammu had to leave Ayemenem, because she had no “Locusts Stand I” (57p).

Whatever little she had, she lost that too by loving a *paravan*. There is double standard even for morality. Mammachi herself takes care of Chacko’s erotic needs. But Ammu’s love for Velutha is considered as a serious violation of moral codes. Ammu challenges the defiled social order and what is represented first, by marrying a man of her choice and then breaking the marriage and getting involved in a forbidden love. She tends to demolish all orthodoxies and ideologies which have outlived their relevance.

### **Other Activist Ideas in *The God of Small Things***

In *The God of Small Things*, Roy explores certain societal taboos and the fatal consequences for those who disregard them. Beneath the story of a family tragedy lies a background of local politics, where the downtrodden hunger for independence and equality.

Roy allows the reader an insight into the emotional basis behind the carefully planned brutality of the touchables, who are dedicated to Kerala’s social code, who believe that in beating Velutha, to death they are enforcing the love laws. It is the influence of outside political and social forces that kills Velutha both spiritually and physically, as well as permanently injures Estha and Rahels’ psyches. Roy wants to point out that in small events and small lives, the world and the social machine intrude and leave people unprotected.

Arundhati Roy also ponders over certain political developments in India, such as the attained independence, the formation of the Congress Government at the centre, and the spread of communism in Kerala and West Bengal. According to her, the Indian society ridden by caste considerations and religious prejudices has not improved even after independence.

She has remarkably portrayed the nature of functioning of communism in her state through the characters of Comrade K.N.M. Pillai and Comrade E.M.S. Namboodiripad. The implication is that Namboodiripad’s views about the situation prevailing in Kerala in 1957 were based on a faulty understanding of that situation and he had started using the police as his tools to achieve his goals when there were riots and strikes.



The reality is that the communist rulers did not want to initiate a revolution and did not want to stop people from taking law in their own hands. They were not telling the people the truth about their intentions. The communists of Kerala have been casteists in their approaches as the writer narrates:

The real secret was that communism crept into Kerala insidiously. As a reformist movement that never overtly questioned the traditional values of a caste-ridden extremely traditional community. The Marxists worked from within the communal divides, never challenging them, never appearing not to. They offered a cocktail revolution. A heady mix of Eastern Marxism and Orthodox Hinduism, spiked with a shot of democracy (66-67p).

K.N.M. Pillai, a communist press-owner is a casteist as he does not like Velutha to be there in the party, as he is an “untouchable”. The writer reports the fact in the following words:

The only snag in Comrade K.N.M. Pillai plans was Velutha. Of all the workers at Paradise Pickles, he was the only card-holding member of the party and that gave Comrade Pillai an ally he would rather have done without. He knew that all the other touchable workers in the factory resented Velutha for ancient reasons of their own. Comrade Pillai steeped carefully around the wrinkle, waiting for a suitable opportunity to iron it out. (121p)

He is not a communist in the real sense of the term as a communist stands for the equality of all and likes the state power to come into the hands of workers irrespective of their castes. People like him are hypocrites, who preach one thing and practice another.

The Naxalites are another group of communists mentioned in the novel, who indulge in various crimes. The details of a murder committed by the Naxalites of Kerala given by the novelist arouse disgust:

That May there was a blurred photograph in the papers of a landlord in Palghat who had been tied to a lamp post and beheaded. His head lay on its side, some distance away from his body, in a dark puddle that could have been water, could have been blood (68-69p).

These Naxalites had no regard either for law or ethics.

## **Ecology and Humanity**

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*The God of Small Things* is as much about nature and landscape as it is about complicated human lives. She interrogates man's modernization and his use of technology that ultimately destroys all other life. Instead of guarding and preserving Nature, man turns into a destroyer. He is out on an ecocidal mission.

There is a very clear ecological concern in the novel. For instance, in the novel, the Meenanchal River has now non-biodegradable plastic bags flying across its surface, harmful effluents and pesticides poisoning its waters and boats which threw gasolie over it. Roy describes the filthiness of the river, just a stream now because of a salt water barrage. The beautiful river has lost its mystique. Economic progress has involved a price:

Downriver, a salt water barrage had been built, in exchange for votes from the influential paddy-farmer lobby... Despite the fact that it was June, and raining, the river was no more than a swollen drain now. A thin ribbon of thick water that lapped wearily at the mud banks on either side, sequinned with the occasional silver slant of a dead fish (124p).

Roy describes the pollution from factory effluents, human carelessness and greed. When silenced by development, in the form of a holiday resort, and industries, the river throws out a stink. It got a new voice.

Further inland, and still across, a five-star hotel chain had bought the Heart of Darkness. The History House could no longer be approached from the river. It had turned its back of Ayemenem. The hotel guests were ferried across the backwaters, straight from Cochin. They arrived by speedboat, opening up a V of foam on the water, leaving behind a rainbow film of gasoline" (125p).

There are spitstains at airports, which are the humans' indelible mark on the environment. The tiny plastic watch lies undecayed beneath the soil. This is symbolically significant of the pollution of the soil too.

All such references, in addition to the numerous images of the natural world, beautifully drawn, suggest a major ecological concern in the novel. Roy believes that the environment should be protected. Her concern endorses her affinity towards a simple and uncorrupted life.

Her book *The Shape of the Beast* too reflects her interest in saving ecology. She writes:

Arrogant interventions in eco-systems that you don't understand can be ruinous (41p).

### **Cultural Conflicts**

Roy is painfully aware of the threat globalization poses to handicrafts and the culture of cottage industry. She upholds the values of folk art and culture to reinforce her battle against the evils of urbanization and mechanization. In the novel, the reason for Baby Kochamma's neglecting the garden, stems from her new love for satellite dish antenna. She abandons her love for gardening for the sake of televised amusements. Roy here depicts the destruction of the local cultures with the arrival of the metropolitan business interests.

The decline of the region's culture is clear from the plight of the Kathakali dancer in the novel. He was once the hero of the village but now his true art has lost significance. Arundhati Roy writes in *The God of Small Things*:

The Kathakali man is the most beautiful of men. Because his body is his soul, his only instrument. From the age of three, it has been planed and polished, pared down, harnessed wholly to the task of story-telling. He has magic in him, this man within the painted mask and swirling skirts.

But these days he has become unviable. Unfeasible, Condemned goods. His children deride him. They long to be everything that he is not (230p).

Arundhati Roy as a committed writer has played a significant and effective role in the presentation of culture and in the reconstruction of society by expressing and depicting the thoughts and ideologies which would speak of new values. She has a sensitive mind and, therefore, on her part, there is a deeper involvement in projecting the social change in its varied forms.

In the broader canvas of fiction, Arundhati Roy takes clues from the society/social structures and manipulates them with the help of her imagination to contain some of the important social realities. A fictional text, being a vehicle for ideology, gives an interpretation of the world it represents. *The God of Small Things* as a sociological novel, deals with the social conflicts and its impact on the individuals and their ideological positions. It is evident that the values and ideologies that the writer believes in and talks about in her non-fiction are also reflected in her fiction, *The God of Small Things*.

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