Socio-Political Matrix in the Fiction and Non-Fictional Works of Arundhati Roy

Mrs. Usha*

Introduction

Arundhati Roy is the prominent Indo-Anglian novelist of the recent times who won Booker Prize for her debut novel The God of Small Things in 1997. Roy’s subsequent literary output consists mainly of politically oriented non-fiction. Roy was born in 1961 in Shillong in Meghalaya and spent her childhood in Kerala. She left for Delhi at the age of 16 and embarked on a homeless life style. She has concentrated her writing on various social and political issues like Narmada Dam Project, India’s nuclear weapons, corrupt power Company Enron’s activities in India. In recognition of her advocacy of human rights, Roy was awarded Lannan Cultural Freedom Award in 2002, the Sydney Peace Prize in 2004 and the Sahitya Academy Award in 2006. Roy’s fictional and non-fictional writing cannot be kept apart from each other. Her literary and political concerns are the two sides of the same coin. In her debut novel, The God of Small Things, Roy enacts the eternal drama of confrontation between the powerful and powerless. The novel deals with class antagonism and class exploitation, the tyranny and injustice that the untouchable has to suffer, the oppression and exploitation of woman in a male-dominated society and above all, the neglect and humiliation that the dalit and the defenceless have to pass through in a caste-ridden society.

The God of Small Things (1997) is about the confrontation between the small man and the big man. Velutha, an untouchable, is the most representative of the small man. The treatment meted out to him reflects the typical curse of untouchability ingrained in the society. Roy shows that this caste bias surface with the slightest provocation even among the most educated and cultured sections of our society. Apart from class and caste discriminations, Arundhati Roy also seems to lambast the artificiality and duplicity inherent in politics. The political characters described in the novel range from the former Chief Minister of Kerala, Mr. E.M.S. Namboodiripad to a common party worker Velutha. These politicians are not bold enough to challenge communal divides. They do not forget their own economic interests and pay only a lip-service to the public. Velutha’s custodial death also exposes the unholy and unwarranted nexus between the police and the politicians. The novel also unveils a vast plethora of details concerning the problems plaguing woman in a male-dominated society. The God of Small things is all about the atrocities against minorities, small things, children and youth, women and untouchable.

Her first collection of essays is the book entitled The Cost of Living, published in 1998. In the most influential essay “The Greater Common Good”, Roy points out that more than fifty million people have been displaced by Narmada Dam project. She points out that the Indian Government has produced no studies to verify the difference from the lowest baseline calculation.
of displaced people, or to quantify agriculture benefits gained from completed Dam Project. In another essay of this collection entitled “The End of Imagination”, Roy argues passionately against the dangers of nuclear weapons. After the publication of this essay, over next three and a half year, Roy wrote a series of political essays on a diverse range of momentous subjects: from the illusory benefits of big dams to the downside of corporate globalization and the US government’s war against terror. First published in 2001, The Algebra of Infinite Justice brings together all of Arundhati Roy’s political writing so far. Two essays in this collections are very influential: “Democracy: Who’s she when she’s at home”, that examines the horrific communal violence in Gujarat and “War Talk: Summer Games with Nuclear Bombs”, about the threat of nuclear war in the sub-continent. She explores the politics of writing and the human and environmental costs of development in Power Politics (2001). In this collection of essays, Roy presents an attack on the forces of modern globalization through an exploration of the privatisation of India’s power supply and the popular struggle against the economically unviable, ecologically destructive and deeply undemocratic construction of a mega –dam. Power Politics is about power and its disguises and describes India’s situation as the one where there is an undeclared civil war is being waged on its subjects in the name of development.

Her next collections of essays are War Talk (2003), Public Power in the Age of Empire (2004) and The Ordinary Person’s Guide to Empire (2004). As the United States pushes for war on Iraq, Arundhati Roy addresses the issues of democracy and dissent, racism and empire, war and peace in her collection of essays War Talk (2003). Roy challenges those who equate dissent with being anti-American. She highlights global rise of religious and racial violence. She calls into question the equation of nation and ethnicity. In her collection of essays An Ordinary Person’s Guide to Empire (2004), Roy aims to remind us that we hold the essence of power and the foundation of genuine democracy. These essays are a call to arms against the apocalyptic apparatus of the American empire. It offers us sharp theoretical tools for understanding the new American empire – A dangerous paradigm. Roy argues that this empire is entirely distinct from the imperialism of the British or even the New World Order of George Bush, the elder. She examines how resistance movements build power, using examples of non-violent organizing in South Africa, India and the United States. In Public Power in the Age of Empire (2004), Roy examines the limits of democracy in the world today. Roy discusses the reduction of democracy to elections with no meaningful alternatives allowed. She shows how governments that block non-violent dissent in fact encourage terrorism and examines the role of corporate media in marginalizing appositional voices.

Her latest collections of essays are 13th Dec A Reader: The Strange Case of the Attack on the Indian Parliament (2006), Field Notes on Democracy: Listening to Grasshoppers (2009), Walking with the Comrades (2011). 13th Dec A Reader: The Strange Case of the Attack on the Indian Parliament(2006) is a collection of essays on the attack on the Indian Parliament on 13 December 2001. The book offers lay-readers a detailed overview of the gaps in the investigation and the loopholes in the case, particularly against Mohammad Afzal. Roy’s introduction to the collection lists 13 disturbing questions that remain unanswered over five years and three court judgements after the incident. Roy calls for an impartial and independent inquiry into the Parliament Attack to reveal the truth about the incident. Field Notes on Democracy: Listening to Grasshoppers (2009) is series of essays which examines the dark side of democracy in contemporary India. It looks closely at how religious majoritarianism and cultural nationalism
simmer just under the surface of a country that projects itself as the world’s largest democracy. She describes the systematic marginalization of religious and ethnic minorities, the rise of terrorism, and the massive scale of displacement and disposition of the poor by predatory corporations. She also offers a brilliant account of the August 2008 uprising of the people of Kashmir against India’s military occupation and an analysis of the November 2008 attacks on Mumbai. In early 2010, Arundhati Roy travelled into the forest of the central India, homeland to millions of indigenous people. The result is the powerful and unprecedented report entitled Walking with the Comrades (2011). Deep in the forests, under the pretence of battling Maoist guerrillas, Indian government is waging a war against its own citizens - a war undocumented by a weak domestic press and fostered by corporations eager to exploit the rare minerals buried in the tribal lands.

The Shape of the Beast (2008) is a collection of fourteen interviews. The book charts Roy’s career as a political activist from 1998 to the present. She expresses her own views about the genocide in Gujarat, Maoist rebels, the war in Kashmir, the global war on terror, democracy, justice and non-violent protests. It is also a deeply personal collection that talks about the necessity of taking a stand and the dilemma of guarding the private space necessary for writing in a world that demands intervention.

In short, Arundhati Roy is not only an accomplished novelist, but also a gifted writer unravelling the politics of globalization, terrorism and other issues gripping today’s world. Roy’s interlocking network of the ideas, attitudes and ideologies emerge from the contemporary social and the political world.