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**Reclaiming the Public Sphere: The Case of Arundhati Roy's Non-Fiction Writings**

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**Abstract**

Over the years, numerous writers around the world have imbued their writings with political messages to stir a discourse in the public sphere with varying degrees of success. This paper makes an attempt to analyze how Arundhati Roy's non-fiction writings demonstrably intervenes the public sphere by drawing a link between their theoretical and linked experience in forming a public opinion. Public sphere is meant to identify and articulate the social problems which need political solution. Writing for Roy becomes an instrument of constructing public opinion to challenge the monolithic narrative of the power-structure meant to restrict the individual freedom of the citizen.

This paper openly engages with the crucial investigation of resistance, representation, power and culture in her writings by analyzing how she has succeeded in de-professionalizing the political debate concerning various social issues. The researcher has comprehensively analysed how she stirs a discourse in the public sphere by affecting her readers both emotionally and viscerally at the same time raising the consciousness of her readers, and encouraging their participation in dialogue. While evaluating the humanitarian approach of her non-fiction writings, the paper throws light on how Roy's writings affect the readers by directly challenging the exclusivity and remoteness of the academic enterprises.

**Keywords:** Arundhati Roy, Political Writing, Activism, Public Sphere, Public Opinion

*In our age there is no such thing as keeping out [of] politics.*

*-George Orwell in Politics and the English Language*



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Over the years, numerous writers around the world have imbued their writings with political messages to stir a discourse in the public sphere with varying degrees of success. Writing both directly within social movements and in the surrounding culture, has been a key element of Arundhati Roy's writings. When the ideas of free speech and public opinion are being intermittently threatened by the power structures, Roy makes an attempt to create an alternative politics of dissent and resistance through her writings to dismantle "the big: Big bombs, big dams, big ideologies, big contradictions, big countries, big wars, big heroes and big mistakes" (Roy, *The Algebra* 53). This paper analyzes how Roy's non-fiction writings demonstrably intervenes the public sphere by drawing a link between their theoretical and linked experience in forming a public opinion.

After the prodigious success of her debut novel, *The God of Small Things*, the readers and critics expected Roy to produce more fiction. She instead became part of social protests and voluntarily chose to write non-fiction essays and articles instead of the genre in which she had gained critical acclaim. However, Roy's choice is not simply a question of generic preference, rather it is dictated by a consciousness that is pragmatic and moral at the same time: "For reasons I do not fully understand", Roy says, "Fiction dances out of me. Non-fiction is wrenched out by the aching, broken world I wake up to every morning." (Roy, "Come September"). Essentially, Roy's activist phase need not be seen in separation from her identity as a Booker prize winning novelist. It is this celebrity position that allows Roy to popularise the stories of dispossessed by appealing to her international audience base. In "Proling Controversial Social Movements: Arundhati Roy's Challenges, Style and Insights", Jane Chapman argues that she has succeeded in "elevating local conflicts to a global level of communication" (174). Exposing the social problems through her overtly political non-fiction writings is not a mean to maintain her celebrity status but instead a way to use her celebrity position for demanding a call to action from the general public.

The socio-political issues in her writings can be seen as an unmediated reflection of the society that guarantees the redemptive quality of activism. The commitment to various public and political issues in her non-fiction writings is a result of her personal involvement as an activist with the same. The discursive politics of Roy's writing is an effect of her activism. This



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spirit fuels her discourse thus challenging the dichotomy that exists between being a writer and an activist. Her first stint as a non-fiction writer was her contribution to Narmada Bachao Andolan by writing and campaigning on behalf of tribal people who were forcibly displaced following the construction of large dams across the Narmada. In “The Greater Common Good”, she makes a plea to the general public to enlist in the struggle for a more just and equal world. But her commitment to the movement does not just end there. After she won the Booker prize money of 1.5 million, she donated the entire amount to the Narmada Bachao Andolan. A far more intense level of activism was exercised by her in her stay with the Maoists in the forest of Dantewada where she recorded their ordeals in her essay “Walking with the Comrades”. Roy’s political non-fiction thus becomes a site of critical engagement with the concept of resistance. Through a personal, passionate and affective mode of enquiry, Roy aims to redefine the logic of development, modernity, progress and justice by expressing political subjectivity to challenge the traditional model of approaching socio-political issues with scientific objectivity.

Roy has clarified that her essay-writing phase is not a transition from her fiction-writing one: “there is no ideological break between the [debut] novel and her subsequent writings” (Baneth-Nouiaihetas 97). For her, writing is not merely a medium to narrate a story. For her, fiction and non-fiction writings are what Geetha Ganapathy-Doré term as “two sides of the same coin” (221). In an interview with Terence McNally, she questions the writer/activist binary that persistently marks the reception of her nonfiction writings:

When people define me as a writer and an activist, I say that sounds like a sofa-cum-bed or something. In fact, isn't literature supposed to be placed at the heart of the world? What you do and what you look at and what you write about, whether it's personal or social or political, whether it's about an insane aunt or whether it's about the invasion of a country – I don't think you can avoid looking at it as a comment on society and on yourself... more on yourself.

She proposes that she has been labelled as an activist only because she has “a point of view” (Roy, *The Algebra* 104). There is no reason, she claims, why writers should take ambiguous



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stances. It is time, she says for the intellectuals to ask themselves some “difficult questions” about the world around them (Roy, *The Algebra* 104). According to Chapman, it is this perspective that makes Roy “an intellectual of the new public sphere” (36). By having a point of view, she is able to initiate a dialogue in the public sphere amongst the people who might agree or contradict with her propositions.

Essentially, Roy’s fiction works are as political as her non-fiction writings. While she examines the socio-cultural power by offering space to the downtrodden who otherwise occupy the marginal spaces in the society in her non-fiction writings; her fictional works, *The God of Small Things* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* also interrogate wider range of social issues ranging from patriarchy, casteism, religious intolerance to corporate globalization. This highlights that the novels and the essays share the same consciousness and orientation with respect to thematic, ideological or political relevance. It is significant because this discrepancy has most consistently marked the reception of her non-fiction writings. Julie Mullaney posits that Roy’s “interventions in debates . . . have received relatively little critical attention” whenever they have appeared in the writings “outside her engagements with these issues in *The God of Small Things*” and it is noteworthy that whereas both Roy and her novel “have been the focus of much critical debate, there has been little sustained attempt to place the novel in relation to Roy’s work before and after” (59). However, limited critical attention has not deterred Roy from openly engaging with the crucial investigation of resistance, representation, power and culture in her non-fiction writings.

With her acute sensibilities as a writer, she gives voice to the silenced and marginalised to stir a public discourse against the state and the capitalist machinery. In her popular non-fiction writings like “The Algebra of Infinite Justice”, “War is Peace”, “The End of Imagination”, “The Cost of Living”, “Power Politics”; she lambasts neoliberal capitalism, the empire, fascism, religious fanaticism, nuclear war and authoritarian government. Her reflexive and subjective style of writing invites the reader to discover different socio-political issues, an approach that corroborates the broader humanitarian core of her political writings. In an interview with N. Ram published in *Frontline*, Roy elucidates, “My style, my language, is not something superficial, like a coat that I wear when I go out. My style is *me* - even when I'm at home. It's the *way* I



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think”. Pramod K. Nayar illuminates that Roy’s “affective prose, the subjective tone, the polemical outbursts, the citation of world events” reflect her specialization in literary fiction which in turn gives her “mobilisation across the precariat public sphere of the world” (52).

Roy’s writings implicitly represent solidarity with the voices of oppressed and disenfranchised by invoking a political consciousness through the complex interplay of generic innovations. In an interview with Andrew Anthony published in *The Guardian*, Roy explicates, “I’m not preaching to the poor what they should be thinking. I’m learning from their arguments”. In her acceptance speech for 2004 Sydney peace prize, Roy declared that there is “no such thing as the ‘voiceless’; there are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard”. She uses her writing to see the invisible, listen to the unheard, and struggle together for a world with the new possibilities. Equebal Hussain writes that she does not hesitate “to call spade a spade” (260). On account of her ferocious and scrupulous viewpoint, she has emerged as one of the most prominent writer who attracts attention of the public towards the pressing contemporary issues.

To understand the full implication of Roy’s non-fiction writings and their intervention in the public sphere, it is important to focus on the structure of her writing. She uses a dense language, careful style of foregrounding, capitalization, intertextuality, euphemistic phrases, overlapping formal and informal terms, metaphors, pronouns etc. to narrate the essential dilemmas of the socially oppressed by questioning the taken-for-granted assumptions. In her powerful one liners, “Instant mix Imperial Democracy: Buy One, Get One Free”, she uses the jargon of the same corporate structure that she is criticising. By not conforming to the rules of English grammatical structure in her writing, Roy swiftly slides across the oppressive structure of capitalism, neo-colonialism and patriarchy to elucidate the need to liberate ourselves from their structural oppression. The fluidity and subjectivity in the structure of her writings “attained through her slippery, complex and poetic registers” over the indifferent objectivity of conventional political writings has given Roy “a cultural legibility and legitimacy that was [is] far more than just an extension of her literary legibility” (Nayar, 49). Politics in Roy’s writings, then, is not a simple matter of engagement with political issues or a style dictated by political consciousness, rather it is a complex and subversive engagement with the politics of resistance itself.



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Roy's writings intervene with the public sphere because they do not merely aim to reveal the unjust social structures but anticipate a response and invoke a renewed sense of consciousness among the general public, "to reclaim romance...of believing in justice, in romance and in dignity" (Roy, *My Seditious Heart* 7). While drawing attention to the connection between knowledge and power, she rejects the specialists and experts for manipulating the simple facts. Her self-proclaimed goal as a writer is "to never complicate what is simple, to never simplify what is complicated [and . . .] to be able to communicate to ordinary people what is happening in the world" (Roy *The Checkbook* 120). For making knowledge accessible to the common people, Roy advocates the method to "tell politics like a story" (*The Checkbook* 120). She discusses the social or political issues with clarity by using everyday instances and analogies and evades the use of jargon which makes it difficult for the general public to read or understand the issues. Ganapathy-Doré explains, "The confrontation between power and powerlessness is the cornerstone of her [Roy's] writing and erasing the artificial boundary between the intellect and the heart, the epistemological goal she has set out to achieve" (221). Inevitably, this has generated her followers among the public, the ordinary people, the educated, the lawyers, the engineers, bureaucrats, university students, journalists, activists, polemicists and the disempowered.

By realigning the role of public in her writings, Roy attempts to pervade the permeable shell of public sphere. Jurgen Habermas defines public sphere as "a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed" (Habermas et al. 49). Roy endeavours to spread awareness amongst the public regarding the political issues of significance. In "Arundhati Roy and the Narmada Dams Controversy: Development Journalism and the New International Public Sphere", Jane Chapman proposes that Roy presents the statistical analysis in her essays with the "characteristic of an investigative journalist" (31). However, she does not only intend to educate her readers about the numbers but also attempts to invoke a sense of urgency to dissent and resist through her essays and articles. In her recent article, "The Pandemic is a Portal", she writes:



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We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.

At the core of her writing as a form is the politics of an introspective and critical consciousness through which she anticipates a response from the readers. In this way, political writing becomes the representative form of an alternative conception which has the tendency to effectively stimulate a public discourse.

Political writing, by its very name, has the “polis” as its audience and this constitutes a much broader demographic – one in which the public participate as readers and agents of social change. The political writing takes place in public sites rather than within the context of academic or strictly-literary venues. In “Public Power in the Age of Empire”, Roy places public in the centre of the rhetorical construction of protest to reclaim its true power from the neo-colonial state and capitalistic structure: “Mass resistance movements, individual activists, journalists, artists, and filmmakers have come together to strip Empire of its sheen....This is a huge victory” (Roy, *The End* 39). The radicalism of her writings is rooted in the projection of solidarity for mass movement which she achieves through her rhetoric and polemics. Mullaney states how “Roy’s critical work, chimerical as it is, anticipates, illustrates and comments upon the gendered effects [of] globalization and sites of resistance (local, regional, international) which call upon global forms of solidarity and action” (70). By exposing how the dominant centre is appropriated and the liminal spaces are marginalized, Roy makes the reading public interpolate and reconsider their everyday opinions.

The public sphere ascertains “a context of discovering social problems and necessities” (Sancho, 12). Through her writings, Roy does not claim to discover anything new. For her, writing is a way to make the readers see and acknowledge the already existing problems. In “The Pandemic is a Portal”, she writes, “The tragedy is immediate, real, epic and unfolding before our eyes but it isn’t new”. Her writing is a passionate plea to her readers to dismantle the grand narratives of flawed progress and instead to find the alternative method to resist the adverse



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effects of corporate globalization and neo-colonialism. The eloquence of Roy's prose allows the horrors of the process to be seen by the readers in all their absurd simplicity. Her writing is a response against the traditional and elitist academic intervention to represent as well as address people who stand outside the circle of academic and literary readership.

Her cross-domain writings rooted in economics, politics and culture have given her mobility across the geo-political borders. For instance, even when her essays are read by someone unfamiliar about the socio-political condition of India, her writing vibrates with the resonance of the universal humanitarian stance grounded in the solidarities of mass movements. Elucidating the cosmopolitan mobilization of Roy's writings, Nayar writes:

Just as the "Occupy" campaign, located in one city, one street, focused on how Wall Street as the "enemy" of "all people" and "the environment", Roy's rhetoric encompasses the world. Rather than focus on, say, India's state-organized development plans (of which the Narmada is the best known), Roy builds common cause with victims of the older institution of American slavery, of contemporary global neo-cons, and numerous such cross-border, transnational issues and peoples. (52)

If social movements are understood as alternative political and cultural values, Roy's political writings are noteworthy in articulating the commonalities across geopolitical and social locations. Priya Kapoor describes the intervention of Roy's non-fiction writings in the public sphere as "a consciousness that includes humanity in its ambit while dismissing any kind of provincialism when it comes to world community issues such as war and peace, child and women's rights, or human rights" (9).

Roy challenges the remoteness of the traditional academic scholarship thereby establishing a rhetoric accessible to the common masses. The complexity of her approach to scrutinize any issue socially, historically, politically and most significantly from a humanitarian perspective characterizes the intervention of her non-fiction writings in the public sphere. The language in her political essays is recast with fervent appeal and subjective questions that affect the individuals at a humanitarian level. In "Do Turkeys Enjoy Thanksgiving?," she beseeches the





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readers, “When will you stop waiting? When will you say ‘That’s enough!’” (40). This kind of personalized approach while addressing political issues set Roy’s political writings apart from the traditional narrative forms of political writings. Her focus remains on providing an alternative account of the movement delivered from the perspective of the people involved as against the conventional perspective of an academic specialist. With the aim to de-professionalize the public debate and make it accessible for the common masses, she renounces her position of authority in favour of a “writer who engages with things that she feels are important to her” (Menozzi, 73).

However, the academic specialists accused by Roy for complicating the facts accuse her in turn for disrupting the academic traditions by treating the issues otherwise considered as an exclusive sphere of specialized researchers with a simple interpretation as a common citizen. Nagesh Rao claims that “Roy the novelist was easily welcomed into the liberal multicultural classroom but Roy the essayist has been asked to wait outside” (161). While Roy advocates humanitarian and personal stance to highlight the social injustice, her critics allege that she neglects the epistemological necessity of providing correct and objective information to support her arguments, particularly in her non-fiction essays and articles. Rao draws attention to the varied, widespread and populist circle of production and reception within which Roy’s essays move. Rao points out that in contrast to the various editions of her novel being published by most well-known and prominent publishing houses all over the world, her essays have been mostly published by small and relatively less known but independent publishers like South End Press and Seven Stories Press etc. Since the publication of Roy’s debut novel in 1997, the platforms for the dissemination of writings have multiplied in the form of online blogs, forums, transmedia journals and social media. With the explosion of cyberspace, her writings have been published in well-known international magazines like *The Nation*, *The Washington Post*, *The Guardian* etc. As a result, Roy’s writings now appear on various online platforms, thus forming a sub-part of the online polemics and resistance. When compared to the limited circulation of the articles in print form, Roy’s visibility thus appears to be much more extensive in the public sphere today owing to the online caches and archives.



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Issues like Maoism and militancy in Kashmir, where Roy takes a bold stand against the nation–state are essentially those where opinions are most sharply polarised and her writing inevitably provokes extreme responses in the public sphere. Her virulence as a radical polemicist has given her a large following as well as a host of detractors around the world. Her writings have evoked both enthusiasm in the public sphere and outrage in the academic circles; they have been equally praised by the common masses as they have been denounced by the intellectual experts. But they have certainly intervened and left their mark in the public discourse. In an article titled “The ArunShourie of the Left”, the Environmental historian Ramachandra Guha argues that it is extremely difficult for an intellectual to ‘listen to’ or ‘speak to’ victims as opposed to ‘speak for’ them. He accuses Roy of manipulating the facts and advises her to go back to writing fiction. Responding to intellectuals like Guha, Roy counters, “I am hysterical. I'm screaming from the bloody rooftops. And he [Guha] and his smug little club are going Shhhh... you'll wake the neighbours! But I want to wake the neighbours, that's my whole point. I want everybody to open their eyes” (Roy, “Scimitars in the Sun”). Through her writings, she aspires to affect the readers both emotionally and viscerally by raising the consciousness of her readers, encouraging their participation in dialogue, and empowering the individuals and communities to bring social change.

Roy's writing, in both its form and subject, is problem- rather than being product-oriented. Her intention is clear. She aims to identify and articulate the social problems which need political solution. She is questioning the socio-political model of the present-day world and is looking for an alternative. But she fails to provide that alternative approach that should bring better development. Md. Ishrat Ibne Ismail writes, “Countering an existing politics is needed through opposition but how that opposition can be created and sustained is a more significant question that should not be left unanswered” (63). Despite the guarantee that an alternative world is possible, Roy fails to point out the way or attributes associated with this alternative world. At one level, it can be seen as a breakaway from Roy's alternative mode of enquiry. At another level, it can be interpreted as an opportunity for the readers and the public to debate and dialogue in a democratic way before coming to the conclusion. This additionally demonstrates the



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subjectivity of Roy's prospect alternative world to accommodate diversity instead of a monolithic narrative.

In comparison to the conventional political writings where the voice of the author is predominant, Roy's nonfiction has multiple voices to initiate a dialogic interpretation of text for her readers. Geetha Ganpathy-Dore emphasizes that Roy's "hybrid language is part and parcel of her resistance" (36). This hybridization of cultural and linguistic influences is suggestive of Russian critic, Mikhail Bakhtin's proposition that a "single voice" or "a single dialect" cannot create a multiplicity of voices or polyphony (358). By advocating multiple genres like dialogues, commentaries, rhetorical questions, reports and parody in her non-fiction, Roy ensures multi-faceted perspective to amplify the voices of disenfranchised and marginalized who find representation in her writings. For instance, in the essay entitled "The ladies have feelings, so...", she asks "Do they have a definable role? Can it be fixed, described, characterized in any definite way? Should it be?" (Roy, *The Algebra* 190). This dialogic fluidity and subjectivity in her writing allows Roy to address several issues that are in dialogue with each other. In a democracy, no single viewpoint can be adequate in the comprehension of any socio-political issue. Therefore, she incorporates various other voices to allow her readers a broader understanding of the alternative perspectives. The multi-voiced writings offer an assessment of public opinion that is more attuned to the principles of democracy, which Roy asserts, is not a universal ideal but "the utopia that all 'developing' societies aspire to" (Roy, *Field Notes* 1).

The notion of public sphere in democracy is based on the exchange of arguments and opinions among citizens and therefore the articulation of public opinion is imperative for the smooth functioning of any democracy. In this context, the concept of political awareness has become critical in the explanation of the variation of political involvement and understanding among citizens. Despite the gloom that engulfs the social problems discussed in her writings, she gives the readers a hope of an alternative world and refuses to accept the inevitability of the oppressive structural forces. In her own words, "Another world is not only possible, she's on her way" (*War Talk* 35). Roy's writings play a significant role in making the ordinary citizens aware about the social problems and their alternative solutions with an effective and subjective mode of enquiry. Despite the lack of alternative solution and hyperbolic exaggeration, the humanitarian stance and



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the cosmopolitan mobilization of her non-fiction make Roy a voice of the masses and give her mobility across a wide readership having diverse geo-political. By directly challenging the exclusivity and remoteness of these academic enterprises on the one hand and to their “scientific” and “objective” mode of analysis on the other, the polemical positioning is advocated by Roy as a vehicle for both evaluating and facilitating writing as an instrument of constructing public opinion to challenge the monolithic narrative of the power-structure meant to restrict the individual freedom of the citizen.

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