



**Interview**  
**“Writing can never be [a] peaceful activity”**  
**-Arundhati Roy**

No living writer attracts as polarised responses as Arundhati Roy does. This might be on account of the fact that issues like Pokhran nuclear tests, Narmada valley project, Maoism, war against Afghanistan 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 writings inevitably provoke extreme responses. However, her life in slums, job as an aerobics instructor, huge publishing advance, Booker win, sedition charges, silver jewellery, choice to go to Dantewada forests instead of modelling for Gap continue to mediate how her writings are viewed and read by the reading public. Understanding the cultural politics of this sense-making allows the scope to see how the meaning of literature is mediated in the public sphere. While this requires studying how the writing is concretised after the writer’s task is over, it is also intriguing to know how the writer views this meaning-making process. In this interview, Roy addresses the questions pertaining to the production and critical reception of her writings.

**Urvi Sharma:** Every individual is shaped by the social structures within which they are placed. In your own words, you refuse to be reduced to a “novel-producing machine”. Having been placed within this kind of market structure as such a popular writer, how have you been able to resist that temptation?

**Arundhati Roy:** My first book sold so many million copies, it actually released me from needing to be in the market place. It freed me to write things that were not necessarily popular or what people didn’t want to hear.

**US:** You do not only embrace your role as an activist but also emphasise that it is not divorced from the task of being a writer. What has shaped or motivated your conscience as a writer?

**AR:** Well... I have written an essay called *The Ladies Have Feelings So Why Not Leave it to the Experts* in which I speak at length about the term 'activist'. I think it's a relatively new word—not a word that was used in the past to describe writer who wrote political essays or took clear political positions. I think that word appeared at a time when literature became an industry with "products" placed unashamedly in the marketplace. It became acceptable to suggest that literature ought not to be political and that writers who were political were 'activists'—not real literary beings. That in itself is a sly, deep, conservative kind of politics in which the status quo is required to be accepted as a sort of default position.

In my political essays I believe the writing, the language itself is the most political thing of all. Because language is a way of thinking. I cannot separate myself from what I write, what I believe and how I think. I could not, in any conscience, write today without denouncing the current regime in the clearest, most direct way. Because it blocks my breathing apparatus.

**US:** There are critics and scholars who question (what they call) the Manichean view of the world in your writings but admire your determination to use writing as a medium to discuss social issues. How do you view this line of criticism?

**AR:** Manichean denotes a sort of crude duality, a polarisation between right and wrong which flattens or erases complexity. But if you take a position on something after taking into account the complexity—that's not Manichean. It's what you feel is the right and just thing to do. Whether it's about dams or nuclear tests or new citizenship laws. Accusing somebody of being Manichean is usually a way of hiding your own pusillanimity. Bizarrely, many of those critics and scholars are saying things I said twenty years ago as

though they just thought them up. It's a bit late, but I am glad they are saying them.

**US:** Have you ever taken interest in the critical reception of your writings (reviews, articles, papers, thesis published about your writings)? Is there any particular line of criticism to your writings that has ever made you reconsider any political or literary stance of your writing?

**AR:** It would be arrogant to not take on board criticism. And I am glad that my writing has generated so much debate. One moment stands out—I was rattled and destabilised by the anger with which some Dalit academics, intellectuals and writers responded to *The Doctor and The Saint*, about the Ambedkar-Gandhi debate first published as an introduction to an annotated edition of Dr B.R. Ambedkar's 1936 speech *Annihilation of Caste* and Gandhi's response to it. Of course, though it was extensively annotated by the publisher, this was not some single authoritative edition of the speech, but only one of hundreds of editions that have sold in dozens of translations and in millions of copies since 1936. Not everyone was furious of course, Many greeted with love and excitement. VCK, the Dalit party in Tamil Nadu honored me with their Ambedkar Sudar award and in Pune I was honored with the Mahatma Phule Samta award. But in deference to the anger, as soon as it was legally possible, I decoupled *The Doctor and the Saint* from *Annihilation of Caste* and published it as an independent book. It has been translated into several languages and published by Dalit publishers too. The Hindi translation is by Anil Jaihind and Prof Ratan Lal, who is Dalit and runs the popular channel *Ambedkarnama*.

**US:** The critical attention showered on your non-fiction writings, particularly after the popularity of your debut novel, is very much visible and cannot be neglected. As a writer, do you consider your celebrityhood as an opportunity or inhibition?

**AR:** It doesn't matter anymore. I write what I like. About the things that move me. It's a pretty internal process.

**US:** You've often addressed the binary that marks the critical reception of your fiction/non-fiction writing. Have you made your peace with this dualistic reception that continues to define your writing career or would you like to reiterate something about the same?

**AR:** Writing can never be [a] peaceful activity... and I don't consider the fiction/non-fiction divide to be a binary. They're both a part of my living, breathing, writing body.

**US:** How do you view the academic researchers like me who are trying to negotiate the resistances in your writings?

**AR:** Honesty, how I view that shouldn't matter at all. Once the writing is published, those words belong to the world to interpret in myriad ways...

x-x-x

*(This interview has been republished from the thesis titled "Writing and Activism: A Study of the Critical Reception of Arundhati Roy's Selected Works". With the intention to retain a point of objectivity during the research process, the researcher made a deliberate attempt to not contact Arundhati Roy and solely depend on the critical responses available in the public sphere for the conclusion of her Ph.D thesis. The interview was incorporated as a post-script to the thesis.)*