

# Arundhati Roy: Writer or Activist?

Nuzhat Amin\*

**Abstract:** This essay evaluates features in Arundhati Roy's non-fiction or political essays. Through the course of her works, she opens up a whole spectrum of questions: can fiction and non-fiction occupy a common ground without dissolving their generic differences, does non-fiction become activism if it strays too far away from conventional practices and actively promotes acts of resistance, can writers choose not to take into account the upheavals that they witness, is silence defensible on the grounds that the political is polemical and fiction is subtle? Roy posits that she is a writer creatively engaged in activism rather than a writer-activist who merely professionalizes protest.

*To expose things is quite different from being able to effectively resist things.*

Writers who have produced both fiction and non-fiction are by no means a new phenomenon. Jonathan Swift, Mary Shelley, George Orwell, Virginia Woolf, Rudyard Kipling to Doris Lessing and more have written non-fiction/ political essays on various issues along with fiction, and critical attention given to their fiction has not distracted us from the merit of their non-fiction, neither did their non-fiction come across as activism. In most cases, the non-fiction they wrote tacitly refrained from activism, also they often engaged in creative exercises or fictional strategies to enhance the critique they were offering. One has to think of 'A Modest Proposal' by Jonathan Swift or Virginia Woolf's 'A Room of One's Own' to see how the spheres of fiction and non-fiction do intersect with poignant results, in the former Swift assumes the narratorial voice of a bigot, in the latter Woolf invents Judith Shakespeare to press her point. However, when political activism infiltrates and is promoted through non-fiction material, the writer effectively is blurring boundaries between non-fiction and activism, between a literary genre and the real world. 'Just representation' becomes murky in that case since the 'representation' becomes latticed to a personal mission to ratify an ideology, to seek to establish in a totalistic way what is wrong or right, just or unjust. In this essay, I look at four non-fictional works by Arundhati Roy: *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* (2001), *An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire* (2005), *Listening to Grasshoppers, Field Notes on Democracy* (2009) and *The Shape of the Beast: Conversations with Arundhati Roy* (2009). The purpose of this essay is not to evaluate the content but the field the essays create, hence there will be no value

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\* Dr. Nuzhat Amin, Associate Professor, Department of English, University of Dhaka.

judgments on the topics Roy deals with in her essays – in other words, this essay will not probe whether she is right or wrong, valid or unjustified in regard to the issues she writes on: namely, globalization, terrorism and neo-Imperialism, nationalism the inequity between the powerful and the powerless, the state and the marginalized, the development myth and the resistance eked by the ‘non-person’. For most writers, a political commitment means addressing wrongs, registering dissent and lending support. I posit that Roy additionally expects the fictional genre and non-fictional genre to wed commitment (matter) and the creative instinct (manner) together.

### Writer-Activist

In *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* (2001), Roy states that it is a “dubious honour” to be a ‘famous’ writer in a country where “millions of people are illiterate” (189). She says that to be a writer is a “ferocious burden” and a saddening onerous responsibility in a country that has gone nuclear and made development goals a crusade. At the outset she examines whether the writer can have or should have ‘definable roles” (190). Roy is careful in choosing her words. On the one hand, she refrains from suggesting that writers and artists be given “an immutable charter of duties and responsibilities,” and on the other, she is imagining that the writer can or perhaps should develop a sensible and personal sense of *stake* if not moral duty, and that he/she should offer dissent and lend support in a politically conscious way. A writer need not be inflicted by rules or roles imposed from outside. The writer must take into account the intricate web of morality, rigour and responsibility that art, “not society” “imposes on a writer” (191). Roy weighs against “trussing” the artist or writer with society’s notions of morality and responsibility – but insists that artists, painters, writers, singers, actors, dancers, film-makers, musicians are meant to “push frontiers, to worry the edges of the human imagination, to conjure beauty from the most unexpected things, to find magic in places where others never thought to look” (191).

Roy states that after the “freakish success” of *The God of Small Things*, it became customary to describe her as a “freak” too (195). She says that the label “writer-activist” makes “her flinch” (196) even when it is used not as vitriolic but as a commendation.

I have been doing this kind of work since I was twenty-one. It’s only to the outside world, those who came to know me after *The God of Small Things* that it seems like a transition. I wrote political essays before I wrote the novel. (36)

I don’t see a great difference between *The God of Small Things* and my non-fiction. In fact, I keep saying, fiction is the truest thing there ever was. Today’s world of specialization is bizarre. Specialists and experts end up severing the links between things,

isolating them, actually creating barriers that prevent ordinary people from understanding what's happening to them. I try to do the opposite: to create links, to join the dots, to tell politics like story, to communicate it, to make it real....*The God of Small Things* is a book which connects the very smallest things to the very biggest. (36)

Her objection to the term "writer-activist" is simple enough. If Roy's *The God of Small Things* is the work of a "writer" then Roy's political essays are also the work of a writer even when involved in activism (196). Roy posits that the segregation between the writer and the activist is unfounded since writers have not themselves opted to limit themselves to producing either fiction or non-fiction. She does not see why the writer who writes both should be called a writer-activist, a label that suggests a dual function like a lugubrious "sofa-bed" (196). Roy's thesis is that she has been "saddled with this double-barrelled appellation, this awful professional label," not because her work "is political, but because she takes "sides." Roy vindicates her position unabashedly saying:

I take sides, I take a position, I have a point of view. What's worse, I make it clear that I think it's right and moral to take that position and what's even worse, use everything in my power to flagrantly solicit support for that position. For a writer of the twenty-first century, that's considered a pretty uncool, unsophisticated thing to do. It skates uncomfortably close to the territory occupied by political party ideologues – a breed of people that the world has learned (quite rightly) to mistrust. (197)

Arundhati Roy's political essays interrogate assumptions around fiction and non-fiction, around roles of the activist and the writer. The main argument she seems to work on is: writers and activists have a good number of virtues in common, however, it is reductive to deploy the 'writer-activist' label as it corrodes the integrity and dignity of both the writer and the activist. Even though, the writer is primarily one who creates and the activist is primarily one who resists and dissents – the writer and activist share certain values like: offering just representation, creating a perspective and locating an episteme. A hyphenated identity like the writer-activist could mean that this entity is ambiguous about its own ontological position. The hybridization results out of a dismissal firstly, that a writer can not be an activist and secondly, an activist even when he/she is a 'writer' is considered suspect. A hyphenated label denotes that a certain overlap or corruption has taken place – the writer on account of his/her activism is no longer deemed a "serious" writer but one who belongs to a "coterie" engaged in producing hysteria rather than art. Art, it is assumed, can be art as long as the expression is controlled. Arundhati Roy posits that it is possible to de-totalize, have fiction infused into non-fiction, have the writer and activist share common

ideals without losing their respective creeds or credentials.

“Once the writer has stumbled on the truth, beauty, art – it is virtually impossible to retract.

The trouble is that once you see it, you can't unsee it. And once you've seen it, keeping quiet, saying nothing, becomes as political an act as speaking out. There's no innocence. Either way, you're accountable. (192-93)

Writers of fiction normatively are only expected to write about the world and its problems with “circumspection” or “discretion, tentativeness, subtlety, ambiguity and complexity” (197) since they cannot afford to be political in a direct manner without damaging their credentials as a writer of fiction. The imaginative act of writing fiction and that of writing texts of overt political nature are forced apart as the former needs to be different in not only substance but also in style. The integrity of a work of fiction relies on its ability to be representational without being doctrinal. In other words, a work of fiction can take sides but not air these views in a way that becomes politically motivated or ideologically didactic. This is why the writer is expected to be circumspect and subtle rather than argumentative and placard-bearing. Roy objects to the premise that writing and political activism need to necessarily exclude one another or if someone does both, it is done at the expense of bearing the ubiquitous epithet, “writer-activist.”

Roy questions why a writer must be necessarily “ambiguous about everything”(197). More pertinently, she asks if this sullen refusal to countenance political preoccupations in literature is not insidious and dangerous. Roy writes rather pointedly:

Isn't it true that there have been fearful episodes in human history when prudence and discretion would have just been euphemisms for pusillanimity? When caution was actually cowardice? When sophistication was disguised decadence? When circumspection was really a kind of espousal? (197)

Roy's conception of the essential need of the writer to be an activist in some measure too is guided by the belief that the writer has taken on the responsibility to be political, in fact as political as it takes. The writer, artist or intellectual are creative precisely because they see what others do not and understand what others do not. She writes:

What is happening to the world lies, at the moment just outside the realm of common human understanding. It is the writers, the poets, the artists, the singers, the filmmakers who can make the connections, who can find ways of bringing it into the realm of common understanding. Who can translate cash-flow charts and scintillating boardroom speeches into real stories about real people with real lives.

Stories about real people with real lives. Stories about what it is like to lose your home, your land, your job, your dignity, your past, and your future to an invisible force. To someone or as something you can't see. You can't hate. You can't even imagine. (215)

Roy feels that a "new space" (215) indeed, a new kind of art has been generated. This new form of art is not hybrid – it bespeaks of a commitment not a contortion. The new art does not infect writing with activism or inoculate activism into writing. Roy describes the potential of this new art thus: it can "make the implacable placable, the intangible tangible, the invisible visible, and the inevitable evitable. An art which can draw out the incorporeal adversary and make it real. Bring it to book" (215). Roy envisions that this genre will join forces with the "politics of forcing accountability" (215).

The writer-activist label, Roy points out:

seeks to reduce the scope, the range, the sweep of what a writer is and can be. It suggests, somehow, what a writer is and can be. It suggests, somehow that writers by definitions are too effete to come up with the clarity, the explicitness, the reasoning, the passion, the grit, the audacity, and if necessary, the vulgarity, to publicly take a political position. And conversely, it suggests that activists occupy the coarser, cruder end of the intellectual spectrum. That activists are by profession 'position –takers' and therefore, lack complexity and intellectual sophistication, and are instead fuelled by a crude, simple-minded, one-sided understanding of things. (209)

For Roy the more fundamental objection to the term writer-activist is that it makes an "attempt to professionalize" protest (209). To professionalize protest is effectively to contain a problem more than anything else. Having only professionals deal with "problems" is neither necessary nor useful – since the "problems" affect people horizontally, in a scale and with a magnitude that requires and justifies group concern and action. Professionalizing protest makes it harder not only for the marginalized and the disenfranchised to participate in raising issues that affect them – but it indeed distances intellectuals and artists, socially – and politically – aware groups from becoming active. Roy points out that

what's happening today is not a 'problem' and the issues that some of us are raising are not 'causes'. They are huge political and social upheavals that are convulsing the world. One is involved by virtue of being a writer or activist, One is involved because one is a human being. Writing about it just happens to be the most effective thing a writer can do. It is vital to de-professionalize the public debate on matters that vitally affect the lives of ordinary people. It's time to snatch our futures back from the 'experts'. Time to ask in ordinary

language, the public question and to demand in ordinary language, the public answer. (210)

This passionate defense for a writer to protest, veers slightly away from the position Roy had noted earlier that writers need not be ‘trussed’ with obligations – however, she insists that writers belong and are involved just as anyone else in problems that we encounter. A writer is not isolated or insulated. As Roy puts it:

Writers imagine that they cull stories from the world. I’m beginning to believe that vanity makes them think so. That it’s actually the other way around. Stories cull writers from the world. Stories reveal themselves to us. The public narrative, the private narrative – they colonize us. They commission us. They insist on being told. (*An Ordinary Person’s Guide to Empire*, 13)

As far as Roy is concerned writing and activism are two discrete spheres that share common ideals and responsibilities. The practitioners of writing and activism are not transvestite entities implied by the hyphenated label ‘writer-activist’. Roy advocates for the need to see activism and writing as complementary projects rather than as a spectacle of deformity. In her view, writing and activism have paved way for a new narrative space where it is possible, indeed necessary for the writers, artists and intellectuals to emerge and speak out from, in dissidence and disenchantment, if they are not to become “an accomplice” of the wrongs and evils that put human civilization in jeopardy. She writes:

We will be forced to ask ourselves some very uncomfortable questions about our values and traditions, our vision for the future, our responsibilities as citizens, the legitimacy of our “democratic institutions,” the role of the state, the police, the army, the judiciary and the intellectual community (198)

Roy’s argument seems to be that the writer cannot *not choose* to be an activist too. Not only because the consequences of not doing so are dire but also because it is precisely the work of a writer to represent the unrepresented or unrepresentable, to lend voice to the silent and silenced. It is not merely a matter of personal taste or preference of one author or another but indeed the vocation of all writers to enquire, interrogate and defend what must be defended and admonish what is to be admonished. When John Milton, for example, wrote the *Aeropagitica* (1644), he was not merely writing scintillating prose but the material he produced, defending man’s right to choose what he reads, could be seen as activism too. In that celebrated treatise Milton takes sides in the argument, he defends a fundamental liberty and does not coil away from espousing the political. *Aeropagitica* does not make Milton a writer-activist.

Roy has in her political essays consistently spoken of the Colonization of Knowledge, which refers to the way state apparatus and corporate systems lay claims that they have the right mechanics, the real data, the concrete analysis, the pragmatic solution, even the best interests of the population they are dealing with. Roy argues on the contrary, that these apparatuses and systems have unreliable or no data of actual benefits, no equitable or practical measures in place to cope with colossal upheavals, no assessments on what the 'human' impact would be, no narratives on how the future and the security of the population or ecology concerned will be impacted. In *Field Notes on Democracy*, Roy shows how

. . . words like 'Progress' and 'Development' have become interchangeable with economic 'Reforms', Deregulation and Privatization. 'Freedom' has come to mean 'choice'. It has less to do with the human spirit than with different brands of deodorant. 'Market' no longer means a place where you go to buy provisions. The 'Market' is a de-territorialized space where faceless corporations do business, including buying and selling 'futures'. 'Justice' has come to mean 'human rights' (and of course, as they say a few will do). This theft of language, this technique of usurping words and deploying them to mask intent and to mean exactly the opposite of what they have traditionally meant, has been one of the most brilliant strategic victories of the Tsars of the new dispensation. It has allowed them to marginalize their detractors, deprive them of a language in which to voice their critique and dismiss them as being 'anti-progress', 'anti-development', 'anti-reform' and of course, 'anti-national – negativists of the worst sort. ('Democracy's Failing Light', *Listening to Grasshoppers: Field Notes on Democracy* 2009, xiv)

In other words, Roy points to how utterly ruthless and reckless development ventures, nationalistic projects and globalization-driven policies are. Knowledge becomes colonized when reports and policy papers are created by experts working with an agenda – when analysis and documentation are viewed from the vantage of a few. She insists that there is not only a shocking scale of apathy and plain diffidence to truth and facts but also perpetrations of gross injustices which masquerade as progress and market forces. Knowledge and the power to change things become the domain of experts and the state machinery, excluding the masses that seem to not know what is good for them. The second symptom that Roy draws attention to is how Knowledge attempts to 'colonize' by disarming the activist. By appropriating the atavism and vocabulary of activism, the "people-oriented" state machinery, the NGOs and the corporate meta-economies have gone on to actually diffuse activism by trying to mimic its values without having to dispense justice or having to ensure equality.

Writers and the activists can expose and resist the Colonization of Knowledge on the level of theory and praxis. As Roy holds, Knowledge can not be the exclusive provenance of a select few, nor can Knowledge be solely about a 'material' progress and not a 'just' one. She insists on an engagement that involves re-possessing what has been taken away. The writer and the activist can work to 'Decolonize Knowledge' so that the narratives and discourses are not dominated by the voice of 'objective' expertise at the expense of the silence of individuals whose experiences are not accounted for. Roy writes:

The theme of much of what I write, fiction as well as non-fiction, is the relationship between power and powerlessness and the endless, circular conflict they're engaged in. John Berger, that most wonderful writer, once wrote, "Never again will a single story be told as though it's the only one." (*An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire*, 13)

### Positioning

Roy's objection to the label 'writer-activist' has to be understood in relation to her own positioning as someone who has no pre-constructed ethos to conform to, hence she is in a position to comment and find a voice that is not moulded by or compelled by her background. Her ethics, as a writer and activist, comes from her very own sympathies and from her personally evolved ethos of justice and fairness. She states with some pride the singularity that this gives her.

If you don't have a father, you don't have a *tharavaad*. You're a person without an address. 'No address' that's what they call you...I thank god that I had none of the conditioning that a normal middle-class Indian girl would have. I had no father, no presence of this man 'looking after' us . . . I had no caste, no religion, no supervision (33-34)

I'm not rural, not urban, not completely 'traditional' not wholeheartedly 'modern'. I grew up in a village. I saw rural India at work. And yet I had the advantage of having an education. It's like being at the top of the bottom of the heap – without the blinkered single-mindedness of the completely oppressed nor the flabby self-indulgence of the well-to-do. (34)

Roy points to the position of story-teller, she has taken on as a conscious choice. The story-teller is a writer who has taken a certain vantage point, the story-teller is an activist who has a certain compulsion to speak out. Coming from the conviction that stories are essentially heterogeneous, Roy states that stories must be told befittingly from as many angles as possible. The individual who narrates the story tells the story utilizing what he/she sees, what he/she is in a position to see or understand. Roy's positionality as someone who has no religion, caste or

supervision gives her a unique vantage-ground from where to locate and narrate stories. It also makes for her personality – providing her an understanding of and identification with the marginalized and the oppressed. She states:

There can never be a single story. There are only ways of seeing. So when I tell a story, I tell it not as an ideologue who wants to pit one absolutist ideology against another, but as a storyteller who wants to share her way of seeing. Though it might appear otherwise, my writing is not really about nations and histories, it's about power. About the paranoia and ruthlessness of power. About the physics of power. (*An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire*, 14)

Roy looks at her positionality as unambiguous and unproblematic. She sees herself as a writer and story-teller, story-telling becomes a metonym for the work she does as activist. The activist is not someone who is predisposed in a certain way or obsessed with a definite ideological creed, rather the activist is a story-teller who makes space for another stance, another sort of insistence, another sort of vocality. Roy is making a few crucial points. One, her positionality as someone without religion, caste or supervision becomes an advantage that helps in crossings that take place as she story-tells (through writing and activism) the lives of the disenfranchised. Secondly, her positionality frames her narratives instead of her narratives creating for her a position to inhabit in. Thirdly, because of her positionality (having received an education and on not being self-indulgent like the rich or blinkered like the oppressed) her politics is something that she has thought through rather than embraced on the basis of class. Fourthly, the position she inhabits provides her knowledge, a special insight and an incredible responsibility. "Just the fact that you're known as somebody who's willing to speak out opens you to a universe of conflict and pain and incredible suffering. It's impossible to avert your eyes," says Roy.

Roy's positionality is the most important key to understanding Roy's politics, her narratives and her outright resistance to the accepted dictum that the marginalized ought to stay on the fringe, be unvocal and preferably unseen. She narrates one occasion where she was able to thwart a most curious proposal utilizing positionality:

Sometimes, of course, it becomes ludicrous. A woman rang me up and said, 'Oh darling. I thought your piece on Narmada was fantastic. Now could you do one for me on child abuse? I said, "Sure. For or against?" (52)

As writer and activist, Roy insists on keeping her positionality unfettered and making the most of the tools that she has at her disposal. Her open positionality is antithetical to the 'professional' blinkered stance. While a professional protestor will be forced to be circumspect and measured, the writer as activist and activist as writer can subscribe to a more open and honest, a more scathing and insistent, a more ebullient and potent politics.

## Elements

Roy's non-fictional works employ recognizable strategies which she hopes will make the readers see a sequence. The sequence she makes is intended to show that she is a deliberate practitioner as opposed to a writer-activist who is ready to sacrifice or subordinate, if need be, complexity and artistic control to engage in straight-talk and plain outrage. Roy displays an array of emotions viz, repulsion, disbelief, fury, frustration and so on. Through these emotions, Roy is able to effectively draw out a very different kind of stance. What we have here is not mere activism or pulpit stuff but a diversity of responses, Roy speaks as writer and activist in multiple ways against the obscene single minded-ness of the powerful trying to prevail over the powerless. Roy is not ranting. She is not overpowered by her furious passions. Rather, readers are to regard her polyvocality and range of emotions as a sequence, a deliberate arrangement, in that it subverts the monochromatic, nonchalant and utopian narrative of Knowledge, Development and Progress with a jagged but synchronic dystopian narrative. Only an activist with a writer's intrepidity will be able to produce a sequence of emotions like that one finds in Roy's works. I have pointed out below some examples of the diverse emotions Roy makes use of. While I have suggested that the emotions make a counter-narrative, I also wish to point out that Roy through a sequence of emotions is celebrating the subjectivity that professionalized activism will not attempt.

Roy writes scathingly why she felt impelled to fight against the construction of the Narmada Dam in India. The epical scale of the displacement that this singular event would cause is compelling reason why any activist would be drawn to the issue but Roy also points out another far more frightening compulsion. The dam could not be seen, the scale of its devastation could not be comprehended unless a frenetic media fever generated around it. Roy is repulsed by the voyeurism that is required for public attention to be drawn, for governments to act on the plight of millions – yet she says she descends as a story predator so that the dwindling story of the grotesque plight of the Narmada sees the light of day. In 'The Greater Common Good', she writes:

I was drawn to the valley because I sense the fight for the Narmada had entered a newer, sadder phase. I went because writers are drawn to stories the way vultures are drawn to a kill. My motive was not compassion. It was sheer greed. I was right. I found a story there...

And what a story it is. (*Algebra* 53-54)

She writes with an unerring fatalism of people who are going to be swept aside as the Grand Dams are constructed and the Greater Good is upheld. Roy's frustration is palpable – her prose quivers and seethes in unmistakable but impotent rage. Yet Roy is not new in finding how perverse things can be. Many others, native and foreign have noted the callous way wrongs are condoned and

the powerless are forced to adapt. In 'The Greatest Common Good', she writes with alarm and frustration of how a nation can be subdued, made to look at the camera and be denied "the grace of rage":

Like his neighbours in Kevadia Colony, Bhaji Bha became a pauper overnight.

Bhaji bhai and his people, forced to smile for the photographs on government calendars. Bhaji bhai and his people, denied the grace of rage. Bhaji bhai and his people, squashed like bugs by this country they're supposed to call their own. (*Algebra*, 133).

To break a beast you break its limb, To slow a nation, you break its people, You rob them of volition. (*Algebra*, 135)

The narrative of development and progress for the greatest good has long taken an objective, unsentimental look at what needs to be done. Roy and others like her have long faced charges of essentializing the issues at stake and sentimentalizing the people believed to be bearing the brunt. What needs to be pointed out is that Roy shows us the Bhaji bhai portrait she uses cannot look 'sentimental' without being putting into context the unequal force that the government or state or global stakeholders possess. Without the (sentimentalizing) pauperizing project in activation, Bhaji bhai is just another person. There is clear frustration that 'sentimentalization' by having the pictures of Bhaji bhais smiling printed in the newspaper is found acceptable but critics find lines like the ones Roy used above "Bhaji bhai and his people, *squashed like bugs* by this country they're supposed to call their own" sentimental.

Roy writes compellingly on the level and scale of denial that exists in the modern world regarding the present state of civilization. In most of her essays, she opines that the present state of civilization has tacitly ensured that the powerful are invincible and the disenfranchised are voiceless. Roy marvels at how efficiently this system operates. In 'Public Power in the Age of Empire' she voices her disbelief:

The Spectator newspaper in London assures us that "[w]e live in the happiest, healthiest, and most peaceful era in human history."

Billions wonder: who's we? Where does he live? What's his Christian name? ('Public Power in the Age of Empire, *Empire*, 295)

Roy in her essays consistently points out that the present civilization draws its sap from a persistent unwillingness to confront the truth and a pernicious fixation on systems put in place by the powerful. The result is that the real is not considered real and the unreal masquerades as the real. The carnivalesque atmosphere Roy highlights not only produces incredulity but also critiques the complacency.

The classic strain one finds in Roy's essays is that of fury. She writes with an unapologetic and uncompromising fury. In most of her essays fury is not merely 'present' but it is 'essential' for on this rests the moral energy Roy exudes. Her fury colours and attests her positionality. It is her signature and her nightmare. It is what as writer she must capitalize on and as activist what she must learn to harness. In 'The End of Imagination; she writes:

If protesting against having a nuclear bomb implanted in my brain is anti-Hinduism and anti-national, then I secede, I hereby declare myself an independent, mobile republic. I am a citizen of the earth. I own no territory. I have no flag...My world has died. And I write to mourn it passing...I know that sentimentality is uncool – but what shall I do with my desolation? (*Algebra*, 21)

Protest is a crucial word. A protest can be seen as a denunciation as seen in the passage above but it can also mean constructing a new territory. For Roy protest or criticism is not just ideological but creative too. Her politics signifies the personal and by personal she means more than an ideological position. She displaces the territoriality implicit in the notion of politics and makes for her politics a new narrative that is non-spatial, un-encumbered even if precarious.

In her essays, Roy will recite a list of common ills and their causes. She makes a composite study of the alchemy of evils she sees around the globe and she bashes them thoroughly. At the risk of sounding repetitious, she persists in providing mugshots of the ills in the globe.

The free market does not threaten national sovereignty, it undermines democracy. As the disparity between the rich and poor grows, the fight to corner resources is intensifying. To push through their 'sweetheart deals', to corporatize the crops we grow, the water we drink, the air we breath, and the dreams we dream, corporate globalization needs an international confederation of loyal, corrupt, authoritarian governments in poorer countries to push through unpopular reforms and quell the mutinies. Corporate globalization – or shall we call it by its name? Imperialism – needs a press that pretends to be free. It needs courts that pretend to dispense justice. ("Confronting Empire," *An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire*, 81)

While an activist will find the themes stark enough, the consequences crushing enough for action – the writer will have to locate more than wrongs and unfairness. The writer has to make protest or action not just seem the right thing to do but he or she also has to create a vantage point, a narratorial perspective and a stylized form. Roy in her essays uses a range of voices and positions: expert, victim, activist, survivor, citizen, artist. From each vantage she takes on a different angle and carries out a different set of investigations. While the activist can afford to be uni-focal and unilateral, the writer has to constantly face new

challenges and re-shape what exists. In the 'End of Imagination', Roy draws attention to the work cut out for the writer of fiction who also writes as activist. The writer of fiction has to repeat what he or she has said at the expense of jeopardizing the writer's objective which is to re-shape and re-imagine. However, Roy is prepared to risk this:

There can be nothing more humiliating for a writer of fiction to have to do than restate a case that has, over the years, already been made by other people in other parts of the world, and made passionately, eloquently and knowledgeably.

I'm prepared to grovel. To humiliate myself abjectly, because, in the circumstances silence would be indefensible. (*Algebra*, 4)

Roy does not shy away from taking on the voice of a full-blown activist. She cultivates the role of the writerly activist by privileging the way she carries out activism, through telling stories and confronting the system. One of the frequent charges against Roy and others like her are of a hysteric sort of politics. Passages like the above show that this is not hysteria but a conscious strategy. The writer and activist after all considered are story-tellers. Their stories are after all what can expose the myths that Empires are founded on;

"Our strategy should be not only to confront Empire, but to lay siege to it. To deprive it of oxygen. To shame it. To mock it. With our art, our music, our literature, our stubbornness, our joy, our brilliance, our sheer relentlessness – and our ability to tell our own stories. Stories that are different from the ones we're being brainwashed to believe.

The corporate revolution will collapse if we realize what they are selling – their ideas, their version of history, their wars, their weapons, their notions of inevitability. ("Confronting Empire," *An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire*, 86)

The fact that Roy conceives activism to be a kind of story-telling does not mean that the protest or critique does not have to be based on facts and figures. Roy uses these substantially and credibly too, even though she has consistently asked for the privilege of a story-teller. There is no paradox here. For Roy the facts generate the story, the story does not manufacture the facts:

Madhya Pradesh currently loses 44.2 per cent of its electricity – 1 billion units a year in transmission and distribution losses. That's the equivalent of six Narmada Sagars. If the Madhya Pradesh government could work towards saving even half its current transmission and distribution losses, it could generate power equal to three Narmada Sagar projects, at a third of the cost, with none of the social and ecological devastation. (*An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire*, 247)

Her essays make frequent references like the one shown above. Roy is responding to the experts, her charge against experts are that their conclusions are projections that are arrived at without computing the social and ecological cost. In this case should Roy's conclusions be taken to be flaw proof? The point here is not whether Roy's essays are more correct or more reliable – but the essays represent an assessment – a counter-assessment of what has been in circulation.

Roy takes on the position of the survivor or citizen, in fact some of the most persuasive parts of her essays are those where she shows how we are all survivors of a world that is insidious. These parts also rationalize the claim that one doesn't have to be an activist to protest what is transpiring, in fact we all are affected and all have a stake. In 'An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire' Roy writes:

The Patriot Act ushers in an era of systemic automated surveillance. It gives the government the authority to monitor phones and computers and spy on people in ways that would have seemed completely unacceptable a few years ago. It gives the FBI the power to seize all of the circulations, purchasing and other records of library users and bookstore customers on the suspicion that they are part of a terrorist network. It blurs the boundaries between speech and criminal activity, creating the space to construe acts of civil disobedience as violating the law. (163)

In her essays Roy draws a malaise and shows how we are all vulnerable to its effects. Roy brings out with vitriolic the impending catastrophes that Great Dams, or rampant nationalism or strident nuclearization – some of Roy's pet topics – can trigger. In great length and with powerful force Roy shows what the victim confronts when the system has not given a thought on his or her rehabilitation:

What shall we do then, those of us who are still alive? Burned and blind and bald and ill, carrying the cancerous carcasses of our children in our arms, where shall we go? What shall we eat? What shall we drink? What shall we breathe?

The Head of the Health, Environment and Safety Group of the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre in Bombay has a plan.

Take iodine pills. Stay indoors, have powdered milk and go to the ground floor or basement.

What do you do with these levels of lunacy? What do you do if you're trapped in an asylum and the doctors are all dangerously deranged? ('The End of Imagination', *Algebra*, 6-7)

## Style

But the most important role that Roy adopts is that as a writer. She uses debate, satire, empiricism, hyperboles, and hypothesis. Roy upholds the importance of public debate. As far as she is concerned indifference is the greatest evil. She espouses the need for informed and responsible debate:

Allow me to shake your faith. Put your hand in mine and let me lead you through the maze. Do this, because it's important that you understand. If you find reason to disagree, by all means take the other side. But please don't ignore it, don't look away. ('The Greater Common Good, *Algebra*, 65)

Satire: While Roy advocates the use of debate and scrutiny, the scientific and rational discussion she also writes with robust satire:

That's what it works out to, thirty-three million people. Displaced by Big Dams alone in the last fifty years. ...We daren't say so, because it isn't official. It isn't official because we daren't say so. ..I must have got the zeroes muddled. *It can't be true*. I barely have the courage to say it aloud. To run the risk of sounding like a 1960s hippie dropping acid (it's the System man), or a paranoid schizophrenic with a persecution complex. But it is the System, man, What else can it be?

*Fifty million people.*

Go on, Government, quibble. Bargain. Beat it down, Say *something*. (*Algebra*, 61)

Hyperboles: Roy will use hyperboles, sometimes for the pleasure of a hyperbole. Critics will have objections to such devices as they seem incongruous with the activist's seriousness. But Roy is not perturbed about this. Fiction and non-fiction are after all only different techniques of story-telling. Roy writes that fiction "dances out of her." But non-fiction is wrenched out by the aching, broken world she encounters every morning. (*An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire*, 13) Even though she says non-fiction is fashioned out of an ache, Roy will every now and then flourish a hyperbole here or there. Take for example the quaintness she posits here:

Nobody knows this, but Kevadia Colony is the key to the World. Go there, and secrets will be revealed to you. (*Algebra*, 110).

Hypothesis: In her essays, Roy uses hypothesis occasionally to press a point. Even though she favours the empirical, Roy has no compunctions about using hypothesis or a hyperbole where required. In 'The ladies have feelings too' she writes:

Corporatizing India is like trying to impose an iron grid on a heaving ocean, forcing it to behave. My guess is that India will not behave. It

cannot. It's too old and too clever to be made to jump through the hoops all over again. It's too diverse, too grand, too feral and – eventually, I hope – too democratic to be lobotomized into believing in one single idea, which is, eventually, what corporate globalization really is: Life is Profit. (*Algebra*, 214)

Roy regards the writer as a citizen. Even though she is espousing activism, she says, she has no axe to grind. All she is interested in is to counter the old Brahminical instinct to colonize knowledge. She would have citizens deconlonizing knowledge and putting it to use in an equitable manner. If the writer and activist work together then can make dissent effectively and globalize it. As far as Roy is concerned not only must the dissent come across as genuine but it must be creative, look larger than life, epic in passion, ground-stamping, table-banging in intensity. Roy's politics is morally electrifying, even to those who do not always find it edifying.

### **Resistance as Spectacle**

As a writer and an activist, Roy is engaged in making protest and globalizing dissent. But she is also careful so that resistance is not merely semantic, or worse a spectacle. While she is enthused about an exciting, anarchic, unindoctrinated, energetic, new kind of 'public power' that artists and activists are shaping in order to confront Empire – Roy remains cautious – she is worried that intellectual resistance should grow side by side not at the expense of "real civil disobedience" (*An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire*, 305)

Roy points out that there are three different dangers that confront resistance movements:

Firstly, mass movements find it notoriously difficult to attract sustained interest from the mass media, "Dams are not newsworthy until the devastation they wreak makes good television. (And by then, it's too late)." (*An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire*, 307)

Secondly, there is growth of strange new "hazards" in the form of the "NGO-ization of resistance." (*An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire*, 306)

The NGO-ization of politics threatens to turn resistance into a well-mannered, reasonable, salaried, nine-to-five job. With a few perks thrown in.

It turns confrontation into negotiation. It depoliticizes resistance. It interferes with local people's movements that have traditionally been self-reliant.

Real resistance has real consequences. And no salary. (*An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire*, 314)

Thirdly, Roy points out that resistance is now becoming a spectacle, a political theatre. She reminds us that this was the case in the past too but the “disturbing thing nowadays is that resistance as spectacle has cut loose from its origin in genuine civil disobedience and is beginning to become more symbolic than real.” (*An Ordinary Person’s Guide to Empire*, 308)

Roy believes that in order to stop resistance dwindling into a spectacle, in order to prevent its NGO-ization and in order to reclaim civil disobedience, Roy suggests that the activist employs the tools of the writer or artist: “We have to use our experience, our imagination, and our art to interrogate” (*An Ordinary Person’s Guide to Empire*, 309). The writer and activist can force into attention and make coherent the pattern of violence and destructive denial that modern existence and civilization enshrines. The writer and activist can collaborate creatively – the artists’ subversive energy should meet the writer’s intuitive grasp (that enables the writer to locate, narrate and even critique what others are not able to). Roy’s political essays posit a stark, unrelenting demand for justice, an unapologetic diatribe against complacency and complicity.

### Tensions

Having said this, it remains to be pointed out that Roy does exhibit a curious tension and tenuousness. While she seems intent on having the writer and activist collaborating – she is anxious that she is seen primarily as a writer. Activism is what disrupts into her writing – her writerly life has to deal with a precocious responsibility. Politics like architecture is not Roy’s calling but something she has incorporated into her only calling: writing. While in her non-fictional essays, Roy’s attention and criticism are directed to ‘real issues’, there is always in them a shadow narrative that is about creating space, defining perspectives and interpreting a vision. These she calls, ‘stories’. Roy takes particular joy in having reached an audience. But she is very forthright that it is because of her writing, not because of her activism. When she accepted the Sydney Peace Prize, she accepted it as a “literary prize” she prefers to think honouring “a writer for her writing.” It does seem peculiar that Roy asserts that she is a writer and not an activist. She seems to be anxious about all the implications of being an activist, and now facing up to her own anxieties, she decides that she prefers the responsibilities of the writer to the accountability of an activist.

... contrary to the many virtues that are falsely attributed to me, I am not an activist, nor the leader of any mass movement and I’m certainly not the ‘voice of the voiceless’. (We know, of course, there’s really no such thing as the ‘voiceless’. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard). I am a writer who cannot claim to represent anybody but herself. (*An Ordinary Person’s Guide to Empire*, 330)

Roy makes a turn around that is quite abrupt and critical. She says in her letter to the Sidney Peace Foundation that it would “be presumptuous” for her to accept the prize “on behalf of those who are involved in the struggle of the powerless and disenfranchised against the powerful.” Why should it be presumptuous? Was she not saying that she was in favour of an exciting public power demonstrating and resisting Empire? First she claims she is not an activist and then she even distances herself from being able to speak on their behalf as well. She does accept the prize as recognition of her writing and for her politics:

However, may I say I accept it as the Sidney Peace Foundation’s expression of solidarity with a kind of politics, a kind of worldview, that millions around the world subscribe to? (*An Ordinary Person’s Guide to Empire*, 330)

Similarly, even though she had to turn down the prestigious Indian Shaitya Akademi prize for literature in protest of government policies, she is quick to note: “I am proud that the jury felt that a collection of political essays deserved to be given India’s most prestigious literary prize.” Roy has a sense of ambiguity about her career as a writer and the accountability she perceives an activist shoulders. As mentioned earlier too, Roy repeats some of the points she has made earlier. The passage below bears out that this was deeply troubling to her and she cannot reconcile the warring compulsions:

Because for me, to say nothing is as political an act as to say what I do. There are these two voices virtually at war within me – one that wants to dive underground and work on another book, another that refuses to let me look away, that drags me deep into the heart of what’s going on around me. (*The Shape of the Beast*, 25)

She writes with despair and not with the conviction she had assumed earlier. She almost speaks of an annihilation: “But, you know, for me to become an ambassador of good causes, would do injustice to the causes and a great violence to my writing self – and that’s something that I will not sacrifice” (*The Shape of the Beast*, 25). This is a most curious comment from a writer who has very publicly appeared to defend causes, has written on these issues and has faced criticism for her opinions. But if one looks deeply enough, it is apparent that this is not curious at all, this is a mere reflection of her open positionality, not a reflection on her lack of conviction.

### **The Question of Smugness:**

Roy is cautious so that the work of a writer and an activist intersect in some places but do not completely quell one another. She is not only anxious that the activism she is involved in might eclipse the work she does as a writer, she not only worries that her activism might give others an inflated idea of what she

does, but she is also worried that she herself might suffer from an aggrandized sense of power. Roy has at least been consistent about one thing. She admits that it has been virtually impossible for her to keep silent in the face of injustices and repression. Having said that, she is also wary that such pressures wrench her away from other things she could be contemplating. She is also wary of the faux sense of power that such occasions generate:

Somebody like me runs a serious risk of thinking that I'm more important than I actually am – because people petition me all the time, with serious issues that they want me to intervene in. And, of course, an intervention does have some momentary effect, you begin to think that it is in your power to do something. Whereas actually is it or is it not? It's a difficult call. (*The Shape of the Beast*, 192)

Roy almost insinuates that the activist faces the danger of being written a role that one is expected to perform. The writer and people engaged in activism are expected to satisfy certain expectations. All these anxieties of Roy about the writer and those engaged in activism (I refrain deliberately from using the label 'activist', since Roy says she is not an activist) acquiring an indulgent level of self-importance or conforming to a persona are rational fears, but probably not too common. It points to the level of self-consciousness and self-discipline that Roy feels is required in a writer and someone who is also engaged in activism.

There is a danger, especially for a write of fiction, that you can become somebody who does what is expected of you...and can put a lot of pressure on you to become something which may or may not necessarily be what you want to be, they want you to dress in a particular way, be virtuous, be sacrificing, it's a sort of imaginary and quite often faulty extrapolation of what the middle class assumes the 'people', the 'masses' want and expect. (*The Shape of the Beast*, 193)

Roy also writes that she has a problem with the money she has earned. She is wary about donating it, even though she does give it away to different causes. She explains that this discomfiture comes from not being able to "subscribe to the politics of good intentions" (195). She states categorically that there are many twilight zones, many things she is uncomfortable with. No matter how hard she tries she is not able to resolve all these ambiguities and ambivalences. Roy states: I'm uncomfortable with lots of things that I do, but can't see a better way – I just muddle along (195). This is classic Roy. She can not explain everything and can not justify everything. This hesitance is what needs to be given attention. All that Roy says she offers is a commitment to resist the indefensible.

### Criticism and Defense

Roy's non-fictional work has received a considerable amount of critical attention. While on the one hand, she has quite a following, on the other hand, Roy has detractors too, evident from the label she has acquired from them as 'writer-activist'. Roy has taken the trouble to answer the criticism she gets. She explains that she is a writer who has taken on the responsibility that basically any conscientious person with a sense of right and wrong would conceive as fundamental duty. She explains why she is committed, and how sometimes she is even compelled to protest, and register dissent because silence would be indefensible. Yet Roy carefully protests that she is not an activist. She is a writer who is engaged in activism, prompted by political and ethical considerations. Roy reacts sharply to charges that her works are that of an activist, she objects to charges that she her non-fiction is less important or more important or different from her fictional work, she resents the charge that her work is excessively loud and harried. Roy seems to think that her fictional and non-fictional works are symmetric rather than different.

In *The Shape of the Beast: Conversations with Arundhati Roy* (2009), Roy addresses some of the charges leveled against her by Guha. In 'Scimitars in the Sun', she addresses Guha's criticism against her hysterical stance. She states:

Guha has no argument against my argument, nothing to say about my facts. So he tries to legislate on how I ought to feel about them. Never was there a more passionate indictment of passion, a more hysterical denunciation of hysteria – he's right, I am hysterical. I am screaming from the bloody rooftops. And he is going Shhh...you'll wake the neighbours! But I want to wake the neighbours, that's my whole point. (*The Shape of the Beast*, 13)

She also dismisses the charge of subjective volition that she uses in her essays. She says that it is generally held that academics and journalists by not using the first person singular come across as objective. Roy states "that's nonsense – a person who conceals his or her identity is no more objective than a person who reveals it." The point being made here is that Roy has no pretensions of being subjective or objective. She addresses what needs to be addressed and says what needs to be said, without blinking, without indulgence, without subterfuge. Roy states:

For an artist, a painter, a writer, a singer, introspection – contemplating the self, placing yourself in the picture to see where you fit – is often what art is all about. For a writer, to use the first person is a common narrative device. It's not just crudity, it's a fallacy to equate this with self-indulgence. (*The Shape of the Beast*, 17)

Another charge brought against Roy is her unoriginality. In many of her essays she takes on her pet topics and the reader might not be faulted for feeling a sense of fatigue. This is an important charge, there could be nothing worse for a writer (or someone who also does activism) than to be called unoriginal. Roy has taken pains to show that as writer she regards originality (a new way of seeing things, indeed seeing things others do not see) as an asset she possesses. It is a skill that she has honed. In other words, we may say that Roy's non-fictional works are original in the way they straddle art and activism. She is just as far as to state:

As for the charge of being unoriginal – when one is writing to advocate a political position or in support of a people's movement that has been yelling its lungs out for the last fifteen years, one is not trying to be original, one is adding one's voice to theirs in order for *them* to be heard. Almost by definition, one is reiterating what they are saying. My essays are not about me or my brilliance or my originality or lack of it. (*The Shape of the Beast*, 17)

Roy's non-fictional work has sometimes been termed simplistic. There is often a litany of great evils that she diatribes against, seemingly oblivious to essentialisms she is indulging in. She has found to be sentimentalizing the masses, often simplifying what the marginals want and so on. To this Roy says with directness: I don't simplify things. I try to explain complicated things in simple language (*The Shape of the Beast*, 18). She writes: "My language, my style, 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 think. My style *is* my politics."

However, Roy seems to understand that she has the 'distinction' of being a writer who attracts a considerable controversy. She has been praised for her work and she has been reviled for her work. While writing a letter to the Sahitya Akademi in order to turn down in protest the prize she was given by the prestigious association, she states: "During the BJP regime I was convicted for contempt of court and sent to jail. During the Congress regime, I am given an award. Though these seem different ways of dealing with the writer, to my mind they are both ways to neutralize a troublesome writer" (*The Shape of the Beast*, 201).

### Conclusion

There are ample evidences unearthed by critical theoreticians and cultural historians to show how literary texts are not benign or mysterious realms. Rather such texts often are permeated by the political discourses available in that time-frame. More so, these texts go on to reinforce the political passion and prejudice of their authors despite their literary intentions/pretensions. Texts that want to be insulated from being "political" seem to be reactionary or worse, complicit with the systemic oppression and unforgivable travesties of justice that human history is replete with. Roy portrays the need for writers and activists to have their

commitments cross-fertilize and form critiques in common resistance. However, she seems to insist that the writer and one engaged in activism has separate functions and separate responsibilities too.

In this essay I have tried to point out that Roy primarily sees herself as a writer, her engagement in activism is something she describes as a wrenching away from her preoccupation as a writer. While it is impossible to keep silent, she insists that she engages in activism in the capacity of a writer, using her skills and resources as a writer. Her activism involves story-telling. Which is why, she believes there is no essential difference between her fictional and non-fictional work. She makes an interesting argument by saying that she is not an activist. She defends the personal and political, but tacitly refrains from wanting to be regarded as a political activist or a celebrity with a mission of good intentions, or an ambassador of goodwill and causes.

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