

POLITICAL OVERTONES AND ALLUSIONS IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S *THE SHAPE OF THE BEAST*

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Abstract

The Shape of the Beast is the collection of fourteen interview transcripts charting Roy's career as a political activist from 2001 to 2008. Roy raises questions as well as explains her own ideas about democracy, globalization, justice, war, terrorism and non-violent protests. From her interviews in the book, we come to understand where Roy's perspective comes from, how her life prior to success and after success shaped the logic behind her activism. The dialogues explore the relationship between her background and belief system. The book explains Roy's essays by giving a deeper personal look inside her life and mind as a writer.

Paper Identification



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In the very beginning of the book, Roy examines the nature of the State, corporate power and the shape that resistance movements are taking:

Deep at the heart of the horror of what's going on lies the caste system: this

layered, horizontally divided society with no vertical bolts, no glue, no intermarriage, no social mingling: no human-humane interaction that holds the layers together. So when the bottom half of society simply shears off and falls away, it happens silently. It doesn't create the torsion, the upheaval, the blowout, the sheer structural damage that it might, had there been the equivalent of vertical bolts. (SB 2)

In the 21st century, many artists consider art as a tool to help their activist motives. They don't take art for its own sake but for the activist sake to bring social changes. The artists recognize the fact that activism in the need of the hour. The marginalized sections of the society face the want of support. India is an agrarian country and most of its people live the rural areas. As they are not connected to the developed cities, the governments and the authorities very often neglect them. Most of the tribals have their own language and culture which cause great difficulty to interact with the main land. Artists find that it is their duty to support the weaker sections of the society through their activism. The illiterate lot is exploited to the maximum extent by the privileged classes. In India, literary artists recognize their need of championing the cause of the

lowest strata through their writings. They resort to art as a vehicle of thought to vindicate the truths before the public. Arundhati Roy considers activism as a mission and not as a profession. She absorbs herself in the predicament of the marginalized people of the society. Activism in the case of Roy is the reflection of this involvement, which she can't resist. She does not like to be called as an 'activist' as she believes that such kind of terminology would restrict the very concept of her activism.

The most important part of this book is "The Checkbook and the Cruise Missile" – a series of four interviews with Arundhati Roy by David Barsamian. It was earlier published as a book in 2004. There is a strong tone of anti-globalization running through this part. The first interview of this section is "Knowledge and Power" conducted in February 2001. The focus of this interview is on knowledge and power, and what both mean to Roy. She discusses the abuse of power by the Indian Government and the arrogance of controlling knowledge. For example, the Government permits Enron's ownership of India's power sector. Roy also describes the irresponsible destruction caused by the big dam projects in India. Arundhati Roy with her linguistic skill uses literature to a height of understanding things from kaleidoscopic view. In her essay "The Greater Common Good", Arundhati Roy gives an analytical view of the dam projects of the Indian Government. She sees through the pros and cons of these projects and brings to light the disadvantages. Roy sees the layers of other problems behind the veil of the so called developmental programmes by the Indian Government. She states:

The fact that they do more harm than good is no longer just conjecture. Big dams are obsolete. They are uncool. They are undemocratic. They are a government's way of accumulating authority. They are a guaranteed way of taking a farmer's wisdom from them.

They are brazen means of taking water, land and irrigation away from the poor and gifting it to the rich. Their reservoir displaces huge populations of people, leaving them homeless and destitute. Ecologically they lay the Earth to waste and cause floods, water logging, salinity and spread of disease. There is mounting evidence that links Big Dams to earthquake. (AIJ 57)

She also opens our eyes to the problems associated with dam project – the heavy loan India has taken from the World Bank and the double interest repayment it has to make. The other scientific drawback is the earthquake caused by reservoir of the dam. Activists protesting against the construction of dams on the Narmada (Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh), Tehu (Uttar Pradesh), and Bedthi (Karnataka) argue that dams would lead to R.I.S. (Reservoir- Induced- Seismicity). That will subsequently cause earthquakes. Roy calls for consciousness of the people to be aware of this universal problem. She states:

The War for Narmada Valley is not just some exotic tribal war or a remote rural war or even an exclusively India war. It is a war for the rivers and mountains and the forest of the worlds. All sorts of warriors from all over the world anyone who wishes to enlist will be honoured and welcomed... doctors, lawyers, teachers, judges, journalists, students, sportsmen, painters, actors, singers and lovers. (AIJ 93)

Arundhati Roy reveals her individual skill and her conscious stand on taking sides as a writer who participates in activism through her writings and action. She makes it very clear to the readers that whatever she says may not always be accepted. But she is not a writer who will say what people want to hear.

She says in the essay, “The Colonization of Knowledge”:

Once you’ve seen certain things, things, you can’t un-see them and saying nothing is as political an act as speaking out... There is no innocence and there isn’t any sense.... When I pay tax, I’m investing in projects I disagree with. I’m not a complete blameless person campaigning for the food of mankind. But from that un-pristine position, it is better to say nothing or to say something. (SB 49)

To a question by David Brasamian, “Why were you drawn to the Narmada issue?” Roy’s immediate response was;

Because I believe that it contains a microcosm of the universe. I think it contains a profound argument about everything – power, powerlessness, greed, deceit, politics, ethics, rights and entitlements.... To me, understanding the Narmada issue is the key to understanding of the world at works. The beauty of the argument is that it isn’t human centric. It’s also about things that most political ideologies leave out. Vital issues – rivers, estuaries, earth, mountains, deserts, craps, forests and fish. And about human beings that most environmental ideologies leave out.... So the real issue is not how ordinary farmers in Gujarat will benefit from the Sardar Sarovar, but how they will eventually suffer because of it. (SB 208)

The second interview “Terror and the Maddened King” is much shorter than the first and was taken in September 2002. The interview begins with David Barsamian questioning Roy about the charge brought against her because of her novel *The God of Small*

Things. Roy gives the reason why she and other must speak up to the injustices caused by the governments and the empires of the world. The third interview “Privatization and Polarization” is the longest one where Roy makes some bold and inflammatory statements. This interview was conducted in November, 2002. She writes, “Terrorism is the privatization of war. Terrorists are the free marketers of war – people who believe that it is not only the state that can wage war, but private parties as well” (SB 92). She further says:

Osama Bin Laden and George Bush are both terrorists. They are both building international networks that perpetrate terror and devastate people’s life. Bush with the Pentagon, the WTO, the IMF, and the World Bank. Bin Laden with Al Qaeda. The difference is that nobody elected Bin Laden. Bush was elected (in a manner of speaking), so U.S citizens are more responsible for his actions than Iraqis are for to actions of Saddam Hussein or Afghans are for the Taliban. And yet hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and Afghans have been killed, either by economic sanctions or cruise missiles, and we’re told that these deaths are the results of ‘just wars. If there is such a thing as a just war, who is to decide what is just and what is not? Whose God is going to decide that? (SB 92)

The final interview, conducted on 26 May 2003, is “Globalizing Dissent”. Roy says that the world is seeing a higher amount and more intense form of terrorism against the forms of globalisation. It is seen against America in Iraq and also in India. The terrorism of America in Iraq is doing nothing more than causing more and more of this dissent. Commenting on her speech in Now York at Riverside Church in 2003, Roy tells David Barsamian:

It was important to me to come to the United States and speak in that Church. Apart from what I said in the talk, which is available as a text, there was a lot unsaid which was very political. A black woman from India speaking about America to an American audience in an American church. It's always historically been the other way around. It's always been white people coming to black countries to tell us about ourselves. And if anybody from there comes here, it's only to tell you about us and what a bad time we're having. Here citizens of an empire want to know what other people think of what that empire is doing. Globalization of dissent begins like that. That process is very, very important. (SB 156)

The most revealing interview of all the interviews in the book is the final one "Ten Years On", conducted in March 2008. In this interview, she talks about the necessity of private space for writing and about taking a stand. The pressures and the freedom that come with success have also been discussed. Here Roy speaks about herself as person, a writer, an activist and a celebrity. It is a known fact that many writers frightened of political engagement as they feel it a risk. Roy is also acutely aware of the big struggle in this position as a writer activist. But very often she is drawn to the happening in the life around her. In short, *The Shape of the Beast* resonates with her concern for the marginal and vulnerable sections of the society. She has put her ears to the ground to listen to the whispering of the truly powerless, to depict day-to-day injustices and to give a forum to myriad voices of the subaltern across the human community.

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