

Lost ethos and dreams in arundhati roy's writings

Society



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“ Fiction and non-fiction are only different techniques of storytelling. For reasons I do not fully understand, fiction dances out of me. Non-fiction is wrenched out of by the aching, broken world I wake up to every morning”.

Arundhati Roy in ‘ Come September’

Arundhati Roy's first novel, *The God of Small Things* has become a highly admired and immensely popular work. On one occasion, she even declared that *The God of Small Things* is her first and last novel. It was difficult to predict whether she would write a second novel. Her second novel, a political allegory, *However*, she is definite that she does not want to write about the village Ayemenem again. She felt that the sense of loss is re-located through her novel.

It is clear from the affirmation that the novel *The God of Small Things* is about the sense of loss-the lost ethos. The sense of loss is relocated, in the sense that Arundhati Roy had widened her sensibility and activity beyond the village, onto national and global levels. Hereafter Roy would fight to identify and relieve the sense of loss in the larger perspective and issues elsewhere. Her later political activism was its manifestation. Nevertheless, the novel is still the nucleus from where the writer located the micro-source of the lost pathos.

As the novel, *The God of Small Things* is her first work of fiction; readers become curious to understand more about the novel as well as its writer. It is to be acknowledged that a work of art, especially a novel does not necessarily supply the remedial measures for the problems dealt with in it.

Arundhati Roy reveals the excruciating sense of lost ethos in her superb novel *The God of Small Things*. She attempts to suggest the remedial measures for such irreparable situations in life through her non-fiction.

She has emerged as a serious social activist, participating in the protests against political, social and religious suppressions of human rights in any form and anywhere in the country and abroad. Her concern and empathy with the victims and her indignation against those causes of oppression are well known. Her commitment is clearly manifested. This peculiar stature of the novelist encourages us of *The God of Small Things* to probe into beyond her first work of fiction.

In fact, Arundhati Roy enjoys semi-formal methods, outside fiction. For her, these semi-formal instruments like conversations are “ a flexible way of thinking aloud, exploring ideas, personal as well as political, without having to nail them down with an artificially structured cohesion and fit them into an unassailable grand thesis”.² Arundhati Roy concedes that there exists a vast world of materials, somewhere between the spoken and the written word. The curious student is in need of this material to explain the lost ethos and its possible reclamation. In such a predicament, the only source available to him is Roy's non-fictional writings, free-lance essays, articles and her vibrant outbursts.

It must be admitted that Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* can be enjoyed and admired as it is, without resorting to her other works of non-fiction. However, it is equally true that the knowledge of Roy's political stands, social attitudes and human concerns, shall enable us to derive more aesthetic

enjoyment and intellectual satisfaction. Hence, in this article, all possible efforts are made to enlarge and enlighten the implied issues found in her fiction, with the help of Roy's pronouncements found in her non-fiction.

For Arundhati Roy, as she confesses that fiction and non-fiction are different techniques of storytelling. However, at the same time she says that fiction dances out of me and non-fiction is wrenched out by the agony and suffering of this shattered society. She adds that the theme of her fiction and non-fiction is the same-the relationship between power and powerlessness. At the same time, the creative fiction and wrenched non-fiction suggest the qualitative difference between them.

It is interesting to note that Arundhati Roy is not happy, when she is described as an activist. The term writer-activist, according to her, is strategically positioned to diminish both writer and activist. It suggests that a writer is shy to publicly take a political position. Similarly, the term activist implies a coarse and crude end of the intellectual spectrum. It can be easily understood as to why she deprecates the distinction. Her concern for the predicament of the present dalits and adivasies drives her to involve in every issue. She asserts that one is not involved by virtue of being a writer or an activist. One is involved because one is a human being.

Arundhati Roy, in her conversation with N. Ram, *Scimitars of the Sun*, reveals the underlying principles of her both fictional and political writings. She affirms that she was writing on behalf of herself. In her writings, if she romanticizes, it is the freedom. In answer to the accusation that she was not original, she comments:

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 them 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. They're not meant to be a career move—they are about re-stating the issue, they're about saying the same things over and over...

If *The God of Small Things* is the statement of the problem, the non-fictional works are the possible solutions suggested to annihilate the problem. If the novel is the body, the political essays are its public apparel. In an exclusive interview by Urvashi Butalia, published in Outlook magazine, titled, I had two options writing or madness, Arundhati Roy said: "I'm not unduly worried because I believe in literature. You judge a writer by her writings. My book is my best ambassador."

The statement is an explicit signpost towards understanding her fiction and non-fiction. The post-colonial literature in India abounds with the theme of marginalization and the oppression of subaltern groups and individuals. However, the authors of this branch of literature highlighted the desperate sufferings and the helplessness of powerlessness that these groups or individuals usually undergo in today's world. Arundhati Roy also successfully draws such a picture in, *The God of Small Things*.

What makes her different from others is her philosophy, a governing ideology, not diminished by either fame or wealth that came to her after the publication of the novel. In the novel, she has beautifully drawn a wonderful

silhouette of a few oppressed and depressed characters in Ammu, Velutha, Rahel and Estha along with angelic Sophie Mol. These characters embody the social and political vision of the author. However, unlike other fiction writers, she unambiguously states her social and political stand without fear, favour or appeasement in her political essays.

Murari Prasad, in his essay, *Articulating the Marginal: Arundhati Roy*, writes:

Characteristically, she enlarges on her concerns about the manifold maladies of the subjugated communities with focused energy, candour and ire in her recent opinion pieces. Notably in addition we notice the intersection of different discourses of marginality such as feminism, caste segregation and untouchability in *The God of Small Things*, as well as her critique of the American domination, neocolonial imposition and global “financescape” in her incisive non-fiction.

In her non-fiction, Arundhati Roy seeks to resurrect the spirit of the dead characters—Ammu, Velutha and Sophie Mol, who epitomize the spirits of feminine aspirations and transgressions, subaltern aspirations and transgressions and artless innocence respectively. In the novel, their lives come to an abrupt and unlucky end. These characters embody the spirit of the writer. Hence, the writer does not wish to leave them dead. In her non-fiction, giving several talks and essays, she seeks to kindle the flame of the burning spirit of these characters in the minds of not just the marginalized but also the humanity as a whole without any sort of discrimination.

While studying and evaluating Roy's fiction and non-fiction, the most glaring aspect noticeable is her concept of politics and style. In the literary

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appreciation and assessment a convenient division is made as subject and style, or theme and technique. The theme of her work is the lost ethos but what is her technique in the larger sense. It may be stated that Arundhati Roy's technique lies in the use of these two words politics and style.

She definitely does not use these terms in their normal and current meaning. For example, the statement that politics and fiction are two sides of the same coin would not concur with the present conception of politics. She also does not show any interest in politics as a party-based activity to grab power or as participation in the governmental machinery. Similarly, she does not connote the term for that cunning intelligence or divisive craft to gain selfish and personal progress and profit.

It is something germinal and intrinsic involving clash, encounter between individuals, classes, especially among the powerful and the powerless; to participate in this fight on behalf of the powerless seems to be her notion of politics. The most sorrowful thing is that politics has lost its meaning, its utility and method as conceived earlier. It was a local or national procedure for choosing a future and working towards one', but now politics has been robbed of this primary function; it has become truly the last resort of the plebeian scoundrels, who mostly lives from opinion-poll to opinion-poll.

The more far-sighted project to the end of their term of office, no further. This seems to be the reason why Roy wants to infuse the new term with new meaning and vigour. Roy hints at her conception of politics on one occasion that what we need to search for and find, what we need to hone and perfect

into magnificent, shining thing, is a new kind of politics. Not the politics of governance, but the politics of resistance.

The politics of opposition. The politics of forcing accountability. The politics of joining hands across the world and preventing certain destruction. Such cross-references between her fiction and non-fiction throw more light on each other. Such a study reveals the creative vision of the writer and her ideal of the world-order.

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