

Fred Dallmayr

## But on A Quiet Day . . . A Tribute to Arundhati Roy

by  
Fred Dallmayr

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Sometimes metimes one feels like “tuning out.” Faced with the incessant noise of war planes and propaganda machines, one sometimes feels like stopping up one’s ears in order to shut out the world. The impulse is particularly strong in the “developed,” industrial North—given the fact that development almost invariably means a ratcheting up of the noise level. Although amply motivated, the attempt for many of us does not quite succeed. For, in muffling the roar of military-industrial noises, our ears become available for and attuned to a different kind of sound: the recessed voices of the persecuted and exploited, the anguished cries of the victims of development and military power. A great philosopher of the last century vividly described the tendency of modern lives to become submerged in societal noises, in the busy clamor of social conformism (what he called “*das Man*”). But he also indicated a different possibility, a different path involving a kind of turning-around or a movement leading from “tuning out” to a new kind of “tuning in.” In his portrayal, this attunement or tuning-in meant an opening of heart and mind to recessed voices drowned out by societal pressures: above all to the voice of “conscience” which calls us into mindfulness, into a new mode of careful being-in-the-world.

As one will note, conscience here does not call one into a solipsism far removed from the world, but rather onto a road leading more deeply into the world, into its agonies and hidden aspirations. Not long ago, such a call struck me somewhat unexpectedly. It happened in the midst of a new war, while fire bombs were dropping on distant cities and the roar of war planes rocked that part of the world. At that time I began reading a book called *The God of Small Things*—and was transported beyond surface events into the deeper recesses of human agonies. The book is from the pen of a writer I had not encountered before (I shamefully confess) by the name of Arundhati Roy. She hails from the “South,” more specifically from Kerala in India, and now lives in Delhi. Happening in the midst of a war ostensibly launched by the

North, the encounter for me had a special significance: by awakening me again to the enormous rifts tearing apart our world, and by urging on me a renewed mindfulness. In the meantime, I have read several of Arundhati Roy's other writings, including a series of essays collected in her books *The Cost of Living*, *Power Politics*, and *War Talk*. The following pages are meant as a tribute to her: as an expression of gratitude to her for serving in many ways as a voice of conscience calling on people everywhere, but especially people in the North, to step back from the pretense of cultural superiority and to return to the cultivation of our shared humanity.

### **A Writer-Activist?**

**P**aying tribute to a writer like Arundhati Roy is risky and difficult—especially for a non-writer (or a non-literary-writer) like me. The difficulty is particularly great in the case of a novel like *The God of Small Things*, an outstanding work of fiction which deservedly has received the distinguished Booker Prize. Not being a novelist or a literary critic, how could I possibly do justice to the vast richness of this book, the immense subtlety of its nuances, its stories within stories and echoes within echoes? How could I fathom its depth of imagination and the intense agonies of its characters? Famous writers East and West have celebrated her work; John Updike has compared it to a Tiger Wood story, while Salmon Rushdie has praised her combination of passion and intellectual verve. My own approach has to be somewhat different. Having spent most of my adult years mulling over ponderous philosophical texts, I have to link her work with my own background which, in the main, has always hovered between philosophy and politics or between theory and praxis.

The aspect I want to pick up first is the title of her prize-winning novel. The very phrase “The God of Small Things” is in a way counter-hegemonic if not seditious. Traditional religion, especially in the West, has always associated “God” with bigness or greatness. Of all the things in the world, and of all the big things, God was held to be the biggest or greatest; among all the many causes and moving engines in the world, God was seen as the first or primary cause or engine. Due to the traditional linkage of “throne and altar,” the bigness of God has tended to rub off on the status of princes, kings, and political rulers. This fascination with bigness has proven to be hard to shake,

and in some form even persists today. Thus, when “world leaders” or presidents claim to be mouth-pieces or “stand-ins” for God, their power appears to be wielded by “divine right.” To be sure, this pretense of leaders is contested and debunked by modern democracy with its emphasis on the importance of ordinary people and ordinary lives. As it happens, these ordinary lives—although seemingly small if compared with the power of potentates—are by no means “small” in terms of dignity and moral-spiritual significance. For grown-up people in democracies, God no longer has need of pomp and circumstance but is content to remain sheltered in ordinary phenomena and inconspicuous places and events. As Walter Benjamin has remarked, ordinary lives at any moment can become the narrow gate through which the Messiah suddenly and without fanfare enters. Thus, it is a small, nearly imperceptible change which changes everything.

In Arundhati Roy’s novel, the change is so unobtrusive that it is not specifically elaborated or thematized. However, on some other occasions she has shed light on the book’s title. In her essay “The Greater Common Good” of 1999 (reprinted in *The Cost of Living*), we find some tantalizing lines. “Perhaps,” she writes,

that’s what the twenty-first century has in store for us: the dismantling of the Big. Big bombs, big dams, big ideologies, big contradictions, big countries, big wars, big heroes, big mistakes. Perhaps it will be the Century of the Small.

And she adds: “Perhaps right now, this very minute, there’s a small god up in heaven readying herself for us.” As we know, of course, this “small god” (if she comes) will be up against all the old bigness: the big old God associated with the biggest country, the biggest superpower, the biggest wealth, the biggest arsenal of weapons of mass destruction, the biggest bigness. If the small god were to come, she would certainly not arrive in a mammoth conflagration or on top of a nuclear mushroom cloud—as some devotees of Armageddon now predict and propagate. She would come on the feet of a dove, as the consoler of the desolate, the healer of the wounded, the liberator of the oppressed. As Arundhati Roy herself stated in a recent interview, commenting on the title of her novel:

To me the god of small things is the inversion of God. God is a big thing and God’s in control. The god of small things ...

whether it is the way children see things or whether it is the insect life in the book, or the fish or the stars—there is no accepting of what we think of as adult boundaries. This small activity that goes on is the under-life of the book. All sorts of boundaries are transgressed upon.

In many quarters, and not without reason, Arundhati Roy is considered a political activist and public intellectual—in addition to, or apart from being a writer. Yet, as the preceding passages make clear, her activism does not subscribe to any “big ideology” or overarching platform seeking to mold and reshape social life; she also does not favor mass organizations wedded to rigid marching orders or agendas. As she remarked coyly about her childhood in Kerala: she grew up in a state where different “religions coincide” and coexist, where “Christianity, Hinduism, Marxism and Islam ... all live together and rub each other down.” The point of her remark was not simply to debunk these “religions,” but rather to relativize them slightly and thus to prevent them from becoming ideological straitjackets. As it seems to me, a main feature of Roy’s work is that it escapes ready-made formulas or pigeonholes.

In a nimble way, she refuses to accept the rubrics offered by contemporary society: the options of ivory-tower retreat (literature for literature’s sake) or of mindless street activism—or else the super-option of the writer-intellectual as the architect of grand social platforms. She is celebrated as a writer; but she is also known as a political activist. What is intriguing and even dazzling is the manner in which she is both—the manner in which writing and doing, thinking and acting in her case are neither radically separated nor fused in an ideological stew. As she remarked in an interview given at the World Social Forum in early 2003: “When I write, I don’t even think consciously of being political—because I *am* political. I know that even if I wrote fairy stories, they would be political.” As she added, literature and politics (contrary to widespread belief) are not “two separate things”—which does not mean that there is not a world of “difference between literature and propaganda” (where the latter instrumentalizes the former for extrinsic goals). For Roy, writing and acting are not at odds but reflective of a “way of being”—reflective of the writer’s distinctive way of being-in-the-world.

In a fashion reminiscent of Edward Said, Roy asks a question which is too often side-stepped by contemporary intellectuals: the question regarding the social responsibility of literature and art (and one might add: philosophy). “What is the role of writers and artists in society?” she queries in *Power*

*Politics* “Can it be fixed, described, characterized in any definite way? Should it be?” In a poignant way, this question had been raised by Edward Said in his Reith lectures of 1993, subsequently published as *Representations of the Intellectual*. At the time of his lectures, Said was renowned as a writer; but he was also suspect in many quarters as a political activist. As he noted in his Introduction: “I was accused of being active in the battle for Palestinian rights, and thus disqualified for any sober or respectable platform at all.” His lectures pinpointed the public role of the intellectual as that of a peculiar insider-outsider, in any case of an “amateur and disturber of the status quo.” If intellectuals were complete “outsiders,” they would enjoy the alibi or refuge of an ivory tower, far removed from Julien Benda’s “*trahison des clercs*”—what Said calls “Benda’s uncritical Platonism.” But if they were complete “insiders,” they would become accomplices and sycophants of the ruling power, thus robbing the intellect of its critical edge. “Insiders,” he writes, “promote special interests, but intellectuals should be the ones to question patriotic nationalism, corporate thinking, and a sense of class, racial or gender privilege.” For Said, the “principal duty” of intellectuals, writers, and artists resides in the search for “relative independence” from societal pressures—an independence which justifies his characterization of the intellectual “as exile and marginal, as amateur, and as the author of a language that tries to speak the truth to power.”

Without implying any direct influence, Arundhati Roy’s outlook broadly concurs with Said’s. In *Power Politics* she lays down two guideposts for writers: first, “there are no rules”; and secondly, “there are no excuses for bad art”—where the second guidepost severely complicates the first. The absence of formal, externally fixed rules does not mean that everything is left to arbitrary whim. “There is a very thin line,” she writes, “that separates the strong, true, bright bird of imagination from the synthetic, noisy bauble.” The point is that the writer (or the intellectual) constantly has to search for that line and allow herself to be measured by its standard: “The thing about this ‘line’ is that once you learn to recognize it, once you see it, it’s impossible to ignore. You have no choice but to live with it, to follow it through.” (In his Introduction, Said observed likewise that there are no fixed “rules” by which intellectuals can know “what to say or do,” but that it is crucial nonetheless to uphold standards of conduct.)

Regarding the public role of writers or intellectuals this means that there cannot be fixed rules dictating either specific social obligations or else mandating radical exile. The rub is again the peculiar inside/outside position

of writers or intellectuals: they have to know sufficiently the language of their community in order properly to address it; and they have to be sufficiently dislodged to contest that language. Whichever way they choose—inside or outside—there is no real escape: “There’s no innocence; either way you are accountable.” As Roy concedes, a good or great writer “may refuse to accept any responsibility or morality that society wishes to *impose* on her.” Yet, the best and greatest also know that if they abuse their freedom—by joining the ivory tower or else becoming “palace entertainers”—they inevitably damage their art: “There is an intricate web of morality, rigor, and responsibility that art, that writing itself, imposes on a writer. It’s singular, it’s individual, but nevertheless it’s there.”

Roy’s entire work is a testimonial to the stringent demands of the “thin line.” In her writings and in her public conduct she has resisted both radical politicization or political co-optation and retreat into the haven of *belles lettres*. Like every thoughtful writer or intellectual Roy does not like to be conscripted into ideological agendas or be submerged in mindless activism. As a reflective person, she relishes subtle nuances and the open-endedness of many issues. In her own words: “I am all for discretion, prudence, tentativeness, subtlety, ambiguity, complexity. I love the unanswered question, the unresolved story, the unclimbed mountain, the tender shard of an incomplete dream.” But she adds an important caveat: “Most of the time.” Problems may be so urgent, public policies so threatening or destructive that even the most pensive person cannot remain uninvolved—without becoming an accomplice. Are there not occasions, she asks, when prudence turns into “pusillanimity” and caution into cowardice? Can a writer or intellectual afford to be “ambiguous about everything,” and is there not a point where circumspection becomes “a kind of espousal”? No one can accuse Arundhati Roy of being pusillanimous or cowardly. Whatever pressing issues or lurking disasters there may be in this world, she has never hesitated to speak out—and do so forcefully and without equivocation. In her words again:

Isn’t it true, or at least theoretically possible, that there are times in the life of a people or a nation when the political climate demands that we—even the most sophisticated of us—overtly take sides? I believe that such times are upon us. And I believe that in the coming years intellectuals and artists in India will be called upon to take sides.

Not only in India, one might add, but all over the world.

### **The Military-Industrial Complex**

THE ISSUES ON WHICH ARUNDHATI ROY HAS MOST frequently and most forcefully spoken are two: big corporate business and the war machine—whose interconnection or collusion President Dwight Eisenhower had termed the “military-industrial complex.” This interconnection has been steadily tightening since Eisenhower’s time. Basically, the war machine is designed to keep markets stable and safe for business investments; in turn, corporate business finances the maintenance of the war machine. For Roy, the most glaring and preposterous manifestations of this collusion in India are the development of the nuclear bomb and the construction of “big dams” or mega-dams. Some of her sharpest attacks have been leveled at these targets. Although not intuitively evident, she has neatly pinpointed the linkage between the two phenomena—while inserting both in the broader framework of globalization. From a global angle, dam construction is part of the global market dominated by Western corporate business; on the other hand, nuclear bombs are compensatory devices meant to provide domestic security and to pacify volatile masses.

As she noted in an interview with David Barsamian in 2001, it is crucial to perceive the links between “privatization, globalization, and [religious] fundamentalism.” For when, in constructing dams, a country like India is “selling its entire power sector” to foreign business firms (like Enron), pressure is placed on the government to compensate people by building a bomb or else by erecting a “Hindu temple on the site of the Babri mosque.” So, this is the trade-off one has to understand: “With one hand, you are selling the country out to Western multinationals; and with the other, you want to defend your borders with nuclear bombs.”

Dam construction has been a major preoccupation of modern India. Just as, for Lenin, electrification held the key to Russia’s future, dams—in particular mega-dams—were touted as springboards of India’s rapid economic development. In a famous speech in 1948, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had proclaimed that “dams are the temples of modern India” (a phrasing he himself came to regret later). In the period following independence, the

country embarked on a craze of dam constructions, one more ambitious and extensive than the other. As Roy notes in *The Cost of Living*, India is “the third largest dam-builder in the world,” having constructed since 1948 a total of roughly 3,300 big dams. The latest and most ambitious undertaking along these lines is the Sardar Sarovar Dam, a monumental mega-dam that is being built on the Narmada River in central India—the same river which, according to government plans, is going to provide sites in the future for some additional three thousand dams. Although heralded as developmental marvels, the human and social costs of big dams have so far vastly outstripped any economic benefits. In Roy’s words, the reservoirs of these dams have “uprooted millions of people” (perhaps as many as thirty million). What is worse: “There are no government records of how many people have actually been displaced” and there is a total lack of anything resembling a “national rehabilitation policy.” Against the backdrop of this grim scenario, the Sardar Sarovar Dam is now taking its toll. As the waters at the dam’s reservoir are rising every hour, she writes, “more than ten thousand people face submergence. They have nowhere to go.”

Dam construction in India is complicated and aggravated by the impact of globalization—which today is closely linked with the panaceas of neo-liberalism, structural adjustment, and (above all) privatization. The latter policy is particularly grievous when it involves the privatization of water resources in third-world countries. In this case, the policy does not just mean an innocuous “structural adjustment,” but the transfer of effective control over the daily lives of millions of people. This transfer, one should note well, does not signify the end of “power” but rather the replacement of public power—the role of democratically elected leaders—by the unaccountable power of executives of private (chiefly foreign or multi-national) businesses. Keeping one’s focus on water-generated or electrical power, the deeper meaning of “power politics,” in Roy’s usage, becomes clear. As she states: “Dam builders want to control public water policies” just as “power utility companies want to draft power policies, and financial institutions want to supervise government investment.” In this context, Roy offers one of the most trenchant definitions of “privatization” that one can find in the literature anywhere. “What does privatization really mean?” she asks, and answers:

Essentially, it is the transfer of productive public assets from the state to private companies. Productive assets include natural resources: earth, forest, water, air. These are assets that

the state holds in trust for the people it represents. In a country like India, seventy percent of the population lives in rural areas. That's seven hundred million people. Their lives depend directly on access to natural resources. To snatch these away and sell them as stock to private companies is a process of barbaric dispossession on a scale that has no parallel in history.

The consequences of the privatization of natural resources are today no longer left to guess-work or conjecture. In 1999—Roy recalls—the government of Bolivia privatized the public water supply system in the city of Cochabamba and signed a forty-year lease with a consortium headed by Bechtel, the giant U.S. engineering firm: “The first thing Bechtel did was to raise the price of water; hundreds of thousands of people simply couldn't afford it any more.” Something similar may be in store for people in India. With regard to water resources there, the prime advocates and beneficiaries of privatization have been General Electric and Enron. Typically, concerned state governments in India have been induced to sign so-called “Power Purchase Agreements” with big companies, preferably foreign or multinational companies—agreements which transfer basic control over water and electric power to the purchasers. When such agreements break down or run into trouble with local agencies, they tend to be renegotiated—often at rates of return still more beneficial to the purchasing companies.

In Roy's words: “The fish bowl of the drive to privatize power, its truly star turn, is the story of Enron, the Houston-based natural gas company.” The first Power Purchase Agreement between Enron and the state of Maharashtra was signed in 1993. Due to changes in political leadership at the state level, the contract had to be repeatedly re-written and renegotiated, leading to steadily higher costs to the state. While the initial contract pegged the annual amount owed to Enron in the neighborhood of four hundred million dollars, the latest “re-negotiated” agreement compels Maharashtra to pay to Enron a sum of thirty billion dollars. As Roy comments: “It constitutes the largest contract ever signed in the history of India.... Experts who have studied the project have called it the most massive fraud in the country's history.”

To be sure, the costs of dam constructions and the sale of water resources are not only borne by local governments, but also (and even principally) by the masses of poor people victimized by “power politics.” Despite the huge fanfare boosting big dams and big companies, the results for these masses

have been disheartening. After the construction of thousands of dams, Roy notes, some 250 million people have no access to safe drinking water, while over eighty percent of rural households still do not have electricity. The deprivation is experienced most acutely by the Adivasis (indigenous tribal people) and the Dalits (formerly called “Untouchables”) who are also most seriously affected by big dams. In the case of the Sardar Sarovar Dam on the Narmada River, more than half of all the people displaced are Adivasis; and another large segment is made up of Dalits. Here power politics joins the grim story of ethnic conflict and caste discrimination. “The ethnic ‘otherness’ of these victims,” Roy comments, “takes some of the pressure off the ‘nation builders.’ It’s like having an expense account” whereby India’s poorest people are “subsidizing the life-styles of her richest.”

Thus, despite appeals to the “greater common good” (supposedly advanced by big dams), a good part of the “cost of living” of the upper crust of society is charged to the meager fortunes of the poor. When faced with inequities or injustices of such proportions, Roy’s language tends to become stirring and nearly biblical—reminiscent of Lincoln’s fulmination against a “house divided.” “The millions of displaced people in India,” we read in *The Cost of Living*,

are nothing but refugees of an unacknowledged war. And we, like the citizens of White America and French Canada and Hitler’s Germany, are condoning it by looking away. Why? Because we are told that it’s being done for the sake of the Greater Common Good. That it’s being done in the name of Progress, in the name of the National Interest (which, of course, is paramount)...We believe what it benefits us to believe.

As previously mentioned, the construction of mega-dams is closely linked with militarism or the advancement of military power—which, in our age, means the development of nuclear bombs and weapons of mass destruction. In India, the big event happened in May 1998 with the detonation of the first nuclear bomb—an explosion which, according to government reports, made “the desert shake” and a “whole mountain turn white.” For Arundhati Roy—voicing the sentiments of millions of people in India and elsewhere—the event was an ominous turning point steering the country and the rest of the world in a perilous and potentially disastrous direction. As she noted, the case against nuclear weapons had been made by thoughtful people many

times in the past, often in passionate and eloquent language; but this fact offered no excuse for remaining silent. Despite a certain fatigue induced by the need to repeat the obvious, the case had to be restated clearly and forcefully: “We have to reach within ourselves and find the strength to think, to fight.”

As with regard to mega-dams and their social consequences, Roy lent her pen to the vigorous denunciation of militarism and nuclear mega-politics. In language designed to infuriate Indian chauvinists and especially devotees of “Hindutva” (India for Hindus), an essay published in the aftermath of the explosion asserted bluntly: “India’s nuclear tests, the manner in which they were conducted, the euphoria with which they have been greeted (by us) is indefensible. To me, it signifies dreadful things: the end of imagination; the end of freedom actually.” In still bolder language, the same essay exposed the linkage between mega-bombs and the ruling military-industrial complex which, in India and elsewhere, constitutes the major threat to the survival of democratic institutions: “India’s nuclear bomb is the final act of betrayal by a ruling class that has failed its people [that is, failed to nourish and educate the people]. The nuclear bomb is the most anti-democratic, anti-national, anti-human, outright evil thing that man has ever made.”<sup>17</sup>

One of the most valuable features of Roy’s anti-nuclear essay is its realist candor: its unblinking willingness to look at the horrors of nuclear devastation. This candor is particularly important in view of recent attempts—again by ruling elites—to downplay these horrors by throwing over them the mantle of relative normalcy or else of strategic inevitability (given the global dangers of “terrorism”). Most prominent among these ruses is the rhetoric of “smart nuclear bombs” and (even more hideously) of “preemptive nuclear strikes.” Piercing this fog of deception, Roy’s essay offers a stark description of “ground zero”: “If there is a nuclear war, our foes will not be China or America or even each other. Our foe will be the earth herself; the very elements—the sky, the air, the land, the wind and water—will all turn against us.” Readers who still remember Hiroshima and Nagasaki will find their memories joltingly refreshed by Roy’s stark portrayal:

Our cities and forests, our fields and villages will burn for days. Rivers will turn to poison; the air will become fire; the wind will spread the flames. . . . Temperatures will drop to far below freezing and nuclear winter will set in. Water will turn into toxic ice. Radioactive fallout will seep through the earth

and contaminate groundwater. Most living things, animal and vegetable, fish and fowl, will die.

Faced with catastrophes of this magnitude, the head of an atomic research center in Bombay (Mumbai) recommended that, in case of nuclear attack, people retire to the basement of their homes and take iodine pills. As Roy scathingly remarks, governmental (so-called) preparedness is a sham; it is “nothing but a perilous joke in a world where iodine pills are prescribed as a prophylactic for nuclear irradiation.”

The reasons given by Indian officials for the development of nuclear capability have been primarily three: the looming danger of China; the ongoing conflict with Pakistan; and the Western example of nuclear power politics. None of these reasons stand up to scrutiny. Regarding China, Roy comments, the last military confrontation happened over three decades ago; since that time, conditions have by no means deteriorated but rather “improved slightly between us.” Relations between India and Pakistan are more tense and perilous, especially when the focus is placed on Kashmir. However, here the geographical proximity itself undermines nuclear programs on both sides. In Roy’s words: “Though we are separate countries, we share skies, we share winds, we share water. Where radioactive fallout will land on any given day depends on the direction of the wind and the rain.” Hence, any nuclear attack launched by India against Pakistan will be “a war against ourselves.” Somewhat more tricky—but ultimately equally fallacious—is the reference to Western power politics and the obvious hypocrisy involved in Western nuclear policies (“bombs are good for us, not for you”). Although containing more than a kernel of truth, the charge of hypocrisy and duplicity does not vindicate India’s nuclear arsenal. “Exposing Western hypocrisy,” Roy asks mockingly, “how much more exposed can they be? Which decent human being on earth harbors any illusions about it?” While protesting self-righteously against nuclear proliferation, Western regimes have in fact amassed the largest arsenal of nuclear devices and other weapons of mass destruction; and they have never hesitated to use this arsenal for their own political advantage: “They stand on the world’s stage naked and entirely unembarrassed, because they know that they have more money, more food, and bigger bombs than anybody else. They know they can wipe us out in the course of an ordinary working day.”

As one should note well, Roy’s point here is to criticize India’s nuclear program, not to shield Western hypocrisy and war-mongering. Her book

*Power Politics* contains stirring passages condemning the spread of war-mongering all over the world, but especially the kind of belligerence unleashed by the so-called “war on terrorism” (what Richard Falk has called “the great terror war”). Roy is adamantly opposed to the high-handed and unilateral definition of “terrorism” by state governments—especially governments whose own policies may have the effect of “terrorizing” large populations at home and abroad. Here is a memorable statement on behalf of the victims of governmental war-mongering: “People rarely win wars; governments rarely lose them. People get killed; governments molt and regroup, hydra-headed. They [governments] first use flags to shrink-wrap peoples’ minds and smother real thought, and then as ceremonial shrouds to bury the willing dead.” In our time of unprecedented media manipulation, Roy’s denunciation of chauvinistic flag-waving and brain-washing surely deserves close attention. One of her main concerns is the unpredictable outcome of nationalist belligerence: the fact that, in pursuing national glory, governments or ruling elites may unleash or exacerbate “huge, raging human feelings” present in the world today. What war-mongering typically ignores are the underlying sources of conflict: especially the misery of common people whose sufferings cannot be alleviated by warfare. At the time of the war in Afghanistan (2001), Roy penned a passage whose salience has further increased in light of subsequent military adventures:

Put your ear to the ground in this part of the world, and you can hear the thrumming, the deadly drumbeat of burgeoning anger. Please. Please, stop the war now. Enough people have died. The smart missiles are just not smart enough. They are blowing up whole warehouses of suppressed fury.

### ***India and the Future***

ROY’S FORTHRIGHTNESS—HER ROLE AS WRITER-ACTIVIST PLEADING on behalf of common people—has not earned her universal applause. Although celebrated by some literary figures and academic intellectuals, her readiness to “speak truth to power” has irked and infuriated chauvinists, war-mongers, and acolytes of “bigness,” both at home and abroad. As she remarked once to an Indian reporter: “Each time I step out, I hear the snicker-snack of knives being sharpened. But that is good; it keeps me sharp.” There can be no doubt

that, despite and in the teeth of great power politics, Arundhati Roy has maintained her “sharpness” and intellectual integrity—not out of spite or meddlesomeness, but out of a deep commitment to humanity at large, to a world inhabited and sustained by the “god of small things.” In this respect, her work has served as a beacon of hope to the persecuted and oppressed, to the victims of military-industrial complexes everywhere. The presence of such a beacon—or a series of beacons—is crucial today in a world dominated or contaminated by globalizing neo-liberalism, structural downsizing, and privatization. In this context, one may usefully recall a phrase she used in her conversation with David Barsamian: “The only thing worth globalizing today is dissent.” To be sure, globalizing dissent does not mean the construction of grand ideological panaceas or the formulation of general marching orders. Rather, dissenters are called upon to resist in very concrete contexts and for a very specific purpose: the alleviation of injustice and misery. “Each person,” she commented to Ben Ehrenreich at the World Social Forum in Brazil (2003), “has to find a way of staying their ground. It’s not that all of us have to become professional activists. All of us have to find our particular way.”

As Roy fully realizes (perhaps better than many “progressive” thinkers), the obstacles to resistance are formidable and nearly overwhelming. Her portrayal of conditions in India and the rest of the world is exceedingly grim—a grimness which has placed her on the “index” of domestic and global ruling elites. Take the example of India first. Her book *Power Politics* opens with passages which are deeply shocking and disheartening. “As Indian citizens,” she writes there, “we subsist on a regular diet of caste massacres and nuclear tests, mosque breakings and fashion shows, church burnings and expanding cell phone networks, bonded labor and the digital revolution, female infanticide and the Nasdaq crash.” As these lines indicate, the country is torn apart by the conflicting pulls of traditionalist fundamentalism and high-tech modernity; at the same time, society exhibits a widening gulf between a small globalizing elite and the large masses of people victimized by mega-dams and big bombs. “It is,” she adds, “as though the people of India have been rounded up and loaded onto two conveyors of trucks, a huge big one and a tiny little one”—with the tiny conveyor heading toward a “glittering destination somewhere near the top of the world,” while the large one “melts into darkness.”

The picture becomes even more disturbing when Roy turns to her immediate environment: the metropolis of Delhi. “Close to forty percent of Delhi’s population of twelve million (about five million people),” she comments,

“live in slums and unauthorized colonies. Most of them are not serviced by municipal services—no electricity, no water, no sewage systems. About fifty thousand people are homeless and sleep on the streets.” Joined by a large army of “informal” laborers, the latter people are the “noncitizens” of Delhi, surviving “in the folds and wrinkles, the cracks and fissures, of the ‘official’ city.”

To be sure, conditions in India are not autonomous or unique, but merely an outgrowth or reflection of conditions in the world today—a world dominated by the West and its only remaining mega-power, America. Roy’s denunciation of Western colonial, neo-colonial, and imperial machinations has never been reticent or subdued. As she wrote on the West’s domineering impulses: “These are people whose histories are spongy with the blood of others. Colonialism, apartheid, slavery, ethnic cleansing, germ warfare, chemical weapons—they virtually invented it all. They have plundered nations, snuffed out civilizations, exterminated entire populations.” What aggravates the situation further is that the plundering of nations has usually been carried out with a “good conscience”: for the sake of progress, modernization, or (simply) freedom. In this respect, Americans have an unequaled record of missionary zeal. *Power Politics* offers a long list of countries which America has attacked or been at war with since World War II—a list ranging from China and Korea to Vietnam, El Salvador and Nicaragua and finally to Afghanistan and Iraq. In nearly all instances, military action was justified by the rhetoric of freedom or the defense of Western (superior) values. Referring to America’s self-description as “the most free nation in the world,” Roy raises the question: “What freedoms does it uphold?” And answers: “Within its borders the freedoms of speech, religion, thought; of artistic expression; food habits, sexual preferences (well, to some extent), and many other exemplary, wonderful things. Outside its borders the freedom to dominate, humiliate, and subjugate—usually in the service of America’s real religion, the ‘free market’.” Turning specifically to the labels attached to the war against Iraq—Operation Infinite Justice, Operation Enduring Freedom—she comments: “We know that Infinite Justice for some means Infinite Injustice for others. And Enduring Freedom for some means Enduring Subjugation for Others.”

As it happens, and as Roy fully realizes, the situation is still more complex and hazardous: the neat separation between “freedom at home” and “unfreedom abroad” cannot be maintained for long. Sooner or later, militarism and the insatiable demands of the military-industrial complex are

bound to undermine domestic liberties as well. This tendency is well illustrated by the ongoing “war on terrorism” and the prioritization of domestic or “homeland” security. In Roy’s words: “Operation Enduring Freedom is ostensibly being fought to uphold the American Way of Life. It will probably end up undermining it completely.” The erosion of domestic liberties may proceed slowly and with all kinds of rhetorical subterfuges. However, security demands will ultimately prevail—with far-reaching consequences. The American government and governments all over the world, Roy continues, will use the climate of war as an excuse “to curtail civil liberties, deny free speech, lay off workers, harass ethnic and religious minorities, cut back on public spending, and divert huge amounts of money to the defense industry.” Considering the latter consequence, there almost seems to be a subterranean complicity between the terrorists and the military-industrial complex, both pulling in the direction of increased defense spending and global militarization. The net result of this collusion is the emergence of a kind of a global “empire” wedded to mega-power politics, with potentially totalitarian implications. The sheer scale of surveillance necessary in such an empire is likely to produce “a logistical, ethical, and civil rights nightmare,” with public freedom being the first casualty. For Roy, an imperial or ruthlessly hegemonic world is “like having a government without a healthy opposition. It becomes a kind of dictatorship. It is like putting a plastic bag over the world, and preventing it from breathing.”

The enormity of the danger—a danger that literally takes one’s breath away—may be conducive to discouragement and despair. In some occasional passages, Roy herself seems ready to concede defeat and throw in the towel. Reflecting on her native India and its recent infatuation with big dams and big bombs, she sometimes appears willing to beat a retreat or escape into purely imaginary realms. “If protesting against having a nuclear bomb implanted in my brain, “she writes in *The Cost of Living*,” is anti-Hindu and antinational, then I secede. I declare myself an independent, mobile republic.” This republic, she adds a bit playfully, so far has “no flag” and its policies are simple: “I am willing to sign any nuclear nonproliferation treaty or nuclear test ban treaty” and “immigrants are welcome.” Playfulness, however, is only a thin disguise here for a deep sadness: “My world has died; and I write to mourn its passing.” As it happens (fortunately), loss and mourning are not Roy’s final words. Even when tempted by despair, she quickly remembers the need to distinguish between oppressive governmental policies and the genuine concerns of common people living ordinary lives, both at home and abroad. Counter-balancing her sharp critique of American

mega-politics, she assures ordinary American people “that it is not them, but their government’s policies that are so hated.” The same trust in ordinary lives also applies to India. Here too, the sparks of common decency have not yet been entirely extinguished, despite massive assaults by ruling elites. Friends of India and friends of democracy are likely to relish the following lines Roy penned in *Power Politics*:

India’s redemption lies in the inherent anarchy and factiousness of its people, and in the legendary inefficiency of the Indian state.... Corporatizing India is like trying to impose an iron grid on a heaving ocean and 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 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 ultimately what globalization really is: Life is Perfect.

In the end, Roy’s writings exude not despair, but hope and commitment to a better—more just, more humane—future. Hope in her case—one should note well—is not born from wishful thinking, but from a sober readiness to “stay one’s ground” in the face of seemingly overwhelming odds. Although severely tested, this readiness is not entirely whimsical or unfounded because, ultimately, hope is sustained by a love that will not quit. “There is beauty yet,” we read, “in this brutal, damaged world of ours—hidden, fierce, immense. Beauty that is uniquely ours and beauty that we have received with grace from others.... We have to seek it out, nurture it, love it.”

Commitment to a better future surely requires active engagement, but—and here is the rub—an engagement that exceeds willful activism. The reason is that the “good life” (so-called) cannot be engineered or fabricated in the manner in which devotees of “empire” construct or fabricate their imperial edifice. Although involving praxis, commitment to a better future also requires a certain reticence, a refusal to dominate, coerce, or construct—hence a willingness to allow the good life to happen when it “comes.” In this respect, Roy’s outlook bears a certain resemblance to Jacques Derrida’s notion of a “democracy to come”—about which he writes that such a democracy must have “the structure of a promise—and thus the memory of that which carries the future, the to-come, here, and now.” No one has been better able than Roy to capture the sense of this promise and to articulate it

*Fred Dallmayr*

in moving language. Here are the closing lines of “Come September,” an address she presented in Santa Fe on September 18, 2002: “Perhaps there is a small god up in heaven readying herself for us. Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. Maybe many of us won’t be here to greet her; but on a quiet day, if I listen very carefully, I can hear her breathing.”