

RECENTERING INDIVIDUAL, RECLAIMING AGENCY: READING ARUNDHATI ROY IN SAIDIAN TERMS

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Abstract

Arundhati Roy, the winner of the Booker Prize, has, in addition to her solo novel, written a large number of socio-political essays which deal with a variety of issues faced by the global community. Casteism in India, oppression of religious minorities, gender discrimination, political dispossession, rise of Hindu fascist politics and communalism in India find a critical treatment in her writings. Her nonfiction prose has focused in detail on the connections between corporate globalization, imperialism, war on terror, neo-liberal policies, and the dispossession and oppression of millions of people in India, displaced by the construction of big dams. Similarly, she has provided a scathing criticism of the US foreign policies and military interventions in a number of countries to ‘save’ the people of those countries from themselves. Though Roy has made her voice heard on a number of important issues, the central focus and the common thread linking her fiction and nonfiction is the importance given to the subaltern individuals and groups. Representing and, thus, recentering the individual in her writings is one of the most important concerns of Roy, and it is on this aspect of her nonfiction prose that this paper focuses on, knowing fully well, and sometimes overlooking (a limitation of this paper), the complex issues involved in the concept of representation. I claim that by recentering the agency of individual Roy subverts the poststructuralist tendency of relegating the individual agency in favour of what Michel Foucault called discourse.

“We have to reach within ourselves and find the strength to think. To fight.”

-Arundhati Roy

Arundhati Roy made her presence felt on the Indian English literary scene with the publication of *The God of Small Things* in 1997. The novel rapidly became an international best-seller, and won Roy the Booker Prize. Soon after its publication, *The God of Small Things* courted controversy and divided critical opinion. The novel is read enthusiastically by readers and critics alike. Roy's Booker Prize win assured her novel and nonfiction prose a certain level of literary respectability and her writings have generated a constant stream of scholarly criticism ever since. She has been read from different approaches and perspectives. Among many perspectives some look at "the marketing of *The God of Small Things*, theoretical developments in postcolonial studies, Marxist criticism and the concept of the subaltern, feminism and gender studies, linguistics-based approaches and criticism that draws on ecology and environmentalism" (Alex Tickell 67).

In addition to the solo novel, Roy has written a very good number of socio-political journalistic essays, focussing on a variety of issues faced by the global community. Casteism in India, oppression of religious minorities, gender discrimination, political dispossession, rise of Hindu fascist politics and communalism in India find a critical treatment in her writings. Her nonfiction prose has focussed in detail on the connections between corporate globalization, imperialism, war on terror, neo-liberal policies, and the dispossession and oppression of millions of people in India, displaced by the construction of big dams. Similarly, she has provided a scathing criticism of the US foreign policies and military interventions in a number of countries to 'save' the people of those countries from themselves. Though Roy has made her voice heard on a number of important issues, the central focus and the common thread linking her fiction and nonfiction is the importance given to the subaltern individuals and groups. Representing and, thus, recentring the individual in her writings is one of the most important concerns of Roy, and it is on this aspect of her nonfiction prose that this paper focuses on, knowing fully well, and sometimes overlooking (a limitation of this paper), the complex issues involved in the concept of representation.

The representation and the consequent recentring of the marginalized is the common pattern in Roy's fiction and nonfiction, though it is more prominent in her political nonfiction narratives. In her nonfiction works Roy represents and re-centres the marginalized individuals and groups, and this paper looks at that representation and the consequent re-centring of the subaltern groups within the framework of Edward Said's theories of humanism and intellectual. Her recentring of the individual articulates a politics of resistance for the individual. Roy's nonfiction narratives also reveal a space for creating opportunities of responsibility and freedom as suggested forcefully by the Noble Laureate, Amartya Sen (*Development as Freedom*). When Roy helps create these opportunities of responsibility and freedom in her narratives, then in many ways her nonfiction resembles to what a Saidian humanist intellectual would do for the benefit of marginalized other. In her attempt at representing the marginalized groups Roy shares many of the assumptions put forward by Said in his critique of what he calls Orientalism and in his propagation of the idea of humanism in his book *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*. Said's humanism relies on the power of "human will and agency" to better the conditions of the subaltern human beings and groups across the globe. Thus, "humanism might or could be a democratic process producing a critical and progressively freer mind" for the disadvantaged groups and individuals (Said 16). In other words, Said's humanism is a democratic process which views all human beings, including subaltern groups, as worthy of equal consideration and opportunities. Thus, universalism becomes one of the prerequisites of the humanist practice as offered by Said, and can be found in the nonfiction narratives of Roy. Said's humanist

intellectual is an individual able to recognize the oppression and injustices of higher authority and who speaks for the oppressed and subaltern minority. He looks forward to progress and freedom for all by absorbing information through education, in order to save or help a chaotic society from ignorance and injustice. According to Said, the main task of the intellectual is to represent the unrepresented and oppressed, and in his *The Representations of Intellectuals* Said maintains, “So in the end it is the intellectual as a representative figure that matters – someone who visibly represents a standpoint of some kind, and someone who makes articulate representations to his or her public despite all sorts of barriers” (Edward Said 12). For Said the intellectual is an oppositional figure who opposes the oppressive power structures and raises his/her voice in favour of the underprivileged. Said’s intellectual emphasizes and defends human rights, specifically those that are breached by higher authority:

“My opinion is that only the first of these two possibilities is truly the modern intellectual’s role (that of disputing the prevailing norms) precisely because the dominant norms are today so intimately connected to (because commanded at the top by) the nation which is always exacting loyalty and subservience rather than intellectual investigation and re-examination” (36).

When Roy represents the marginalized and helps create the opportunities for responsibility and freedom she acts as a Saidian humanist intellectual. Said returns to humanism and to the idea of committed intellectual because for him it is a “worldly practice” that can help academics and intellectuals connect their work to the lives and concerns of ordinary people. Saidian humanism addresses itself equally to literary critics, intellectuals, writers and academics alike. It implicitly becomes a critique of the trend of specialization visible in the study of humanities that separates the aspects of everyday existence – social oppression, injustice and inequality- from pedagogy. According to Said, the trend of specialization has led to the insularity of the academic fields and has divorced them from the worldly matters (Edward Said 76, 77). In opposition to this, Said proposes humanism not only as an antidote to increasing specialization, but as a worldly practice which helps critics, writers, intellectuals, and academics to orient their practices towards individual freedom, universal human rights, self-determination and freedom for the disenfranchised people. And this exactly is what Roy has done in her political nonfiction narratives – represented and re-centred the individual freedom, human rights, self-determination and freedom for the disenfranchised people. Since Saidian humanism represents a universal concern for the other, Roy can be seen as a Saidian humanist, one who represents, re-centres and accords primacy to the ‘most disadvantaged people’ (Said 10).

The ideal of a ‘recentering of the individual’ is voiced by Emilienne Baneth- Nouailhetas in her essay, “Committed writing, Committed writer?” where she also discusses the questions of “individual freedom” and “subject’s agency” (qtd in Ghosh and Navarro-Tejero 98, 102). According to Baneth- Nouailhetas, Roy focuses on the ordinary people and small things as against the bigness of history and this lends a “remarkable ideological continuity” to her work (95). Roy’s act of representation of the subaltern in her political nonfiction and fiction thus becomes an act of recuperating these oppressed voices. This itself becomes an act of resistance initiated by the author to understand different factors and social relations which constitute these individuals.

The focus on the small and the subaltern in order to recuperate and represent the oppressed is the main concern of Roy’s socio-political nonfiction narratives. In “But on a Quiet Day” Fred Dallmayr maintains that the focus on the small and the subaltern is in fact an inversion of the general cultural preoccupation with the big and great. Anuradha Dingwaney

Needham in “The Small Voice in History in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*” analyzes Roy’s deployment of the subaltern to be integral to Roy’s critique of “dominant existing social and political arrangements and modes of writing” (371). Against the histories and actions of the states and the ruling elites Roy seeks to recover the stories of those underprivileged individuals and groups – like Velutha, Ammu, the children, women, tribals, dalits and politically dominated religious minorities - whose voice is wiped out of the mainstream discourse. Even when Roy writes about big dams, nuclear bombs, corporate globalization, neofacism, neo-imperialism, and terrorism, at the basic level her writings deal with the brutal inequalities faced by the ordinary person today – the ordinary person for whom “peace is a daily battle for food and shelter and dignity” (Roy 110). Similarly, Miriam Nandi points out in her entry on Arundhati Roy in *The Literary Encyclopaedia* one of “Roy’s most important concerns is the marginalization of the lower castes of rural India” (np). This concern has certainly translated well into her nonfiction activist prose where she has fore-grounded the inequalities, injustice and marginalization suffered by the subaltern groups. Thus, the subject matter of her writings is invariably the afflicted individual pitted against the power of the big – patriarchal system, state, imperialism, hegemonic discourses, corporate globalization and capitalism, etc. In many ways, such a tendency constitutes the framework of dissent and resistance in her work, though there are writers like David Jefferess who point out the “limitations of dissent as a mode of politics” in her nonfiction (qtd in Ghosh and Naverro-Tejero 158). Jafferess maintains that Roy’s stories of conflict limit the conflict to dissent which lacks the real force for the actual social and political transformations desired from it. In other words, Jefferes points out that “there are some limitations of dissent as a rhetoric and rallying point of the struggle for global justice” (159).

In *Beyond Postcolonial Theory*, E. San Juan Jr. points out that an elision of the facts of exploitation across the categories of race, gender, and class has taken postcolonial theory away from the questions of agency and intentionality of transformative practice (7). This backgrounding of individual agency and intentionality in postcolonial theory is the result of the poststructuralist and postmodernist emphasis on textuality at the cost of concrete material facts of history and political processes (Terry Eagleton 197-198; John Macleod ; Said 214,186). And what is true in postcolonial theory also seems equally plausible in the study of humanities in general. Thus, arguably, the category of the individual stands in need of reclamation and recentering. In Said’s writings one discerns a emphasis on individual responsibility borne out of human action and agency. This is what Said calls humanism. Here the focus on the “individual particular” and its agency to work for “ideals of justice and equality” for all individuals becomes the “useable praxis” for intellectuals and academics (Said 80, 106). He proposes humanism as a “worldly practice” for intellectuals and academics, a practice “that can move beyond and inhabit more than just the original privacy of the writer or the relatively private space of the classroom” (75). In this connection, Emily Apter remarks that Saidian humanism adheres to emancipatory ideals even as it embraced values of “individual freedom, universal human rights, anti-imperialism, release from economic dependency, and self-determination for disenfranchised people” (“Saidian Humanism” 36-37). Like Said, Roy also advocates the link between a writers’ or academic’s writing practice and worldly, transformative issues. Roy shares many premises and goals with Said, namely: the power of individual efforts to determine systems of language, belief in resistance and agency, and an articulation of the vocation of the writer and academic as intellectual. The act and style of recentering and representing the marginalized individual that Roy offers affirms several precepts of Said’s humanism. In “Said, Palestine, and the Humanism of Liberation” Saree Makdisi contends that Said locates his humanistic practice within the

universalism of values of justice, equality, and freedom for all. Roy summarizes the universal applicability of such values when she writes that “if it is justice we want, it must be justice and equality for all – not only for special interest groups with special interest prejudices. That is nonnegotiable” (Roy 117). This means that for Roy the belief in justice and equality, and the struggle for the same universal values must be of paramount importance and urgency. Roy would say that all the resistance movements throughout the world must make it their main objective to fight for justice, freedom, equality, and dignity of all the human beings irrespective of their caste, class, gender, nationality, and religion.

Arundhati Roy’s nonfiction prose constantly re-enters the individual when she discusses the national and international issues of terrorism, Casteism, environmental degradation, nuclear proliferation, corporate globalization, and neo-imperialism. In voicing her concern for the marginalized individual, Roy makes an argument for the dignity and worth of each individual which these forces have consciously sidelined. This recentering of the marginalized individual translates into the conception of the human being as an agent, one who can resist and act, and in turn become responsible for one’s actions. This is a far cry from Michel Foucault’s poststructuralist thought. An engagement with Foucault’s works reveals that he helped to displace the human subject from the central role it had played in the humanism of the eighteenth century. By according primacy to discursive formations and linguistic structures, Foucault, in *The Order of Things* and *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, questions individual autonomy, the category of intention, and most importantly the search of universal truths (*The Archaeology of Knowledge* 56), and ultimately he ends up negating human action and agency. Contrary to the agency negating thought of Poststructuralism, Said’s theories of humanism and Roy’s nonfiction focus on the individual and agency. This emphasis on the individual translates into the statement that human beings make, determine, and create systems of thought, and not the other way around. Roy arrives at the marginalized individual through her critique of the undemocratic and centralized processes of decision-making that impact these individuals profoundly. She discovered that by telling the stories of dispossession focused on individual suffering she was initiating a process of intervention on behalf of ordinary citizens (Arundhati Roy 43-44). Thus both Said and Roy, one through redefining humanism and the other through writing stories of loss and dispossession, variously re-centre the concerns of the individual.

In her critique of the undemocratic practices of the state, Roy points out that for the state the marginalized individuals and groups, especially religious and caste minorities, are virtually non-existent and invisible, who are not supposed to exist, the non-citizens “who survive in the folds and wrinkles, the cracks and fissures of the official city”(Arundhati Roy 206). For Roy these need be represented, and she believes that “a new kind of art” is needed, an “art which can make the impalpable palpable, the intangible tangible, the invisible visible, and the inevitable evitable” (215). In the context of Roy’s motive for representing the marginalized individuals, it is very important to understand that her representation of the marginalized is a move towards solidarity and empowerment of the peoples she represents and is never intended to take agency away from them. For her it is an act of speaking with and not speaking for or about someone. Though she argues that she does not “feel responsible for everybody” (Arundhati Roy 38), she nonetheless affirms that “what is happening in 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” (Arundhati Roy 214). Similarly, she believes that it is the job of the writer to be “able to communicate to the ordinary people what is happening in the world” (qtd in

Alex Tickell 9). At other places, however, Roy has sought to underplay her role as a writer in view of the larger concerns of being human: “one is not involved by virtue of being a writer or activist. One is involved because one is a human being” (Arundhati Roy 211). Also, when she writes that she does not “feel responsible for everybody. Everybody is also responsible for themselves” (Arundhati Roy 38), one discerns that she is not shrugging off the responsibility of writers to represent their people. Instead, she argues that in addition to the writers’ responsibility for the masses, people too are responsible for themselves against the vagaries of the state. Thus, her argument underlines the role of the individual as subject and citizen; one who realizes his/her responsibility to act, to disagree, to criticize, and to be self-critical.

Emilienne Baneth-Noualihetas in ‘Committed Writing, Committed Writer?’ writes, “What Roy proposes implicitly . . . is a recentering on the individual and on a subjective, small-scale time as opposed to the ‘bigness of history” (qtd in Ghosh and Navarro-Tejero 98). She maintains that this “recentering on the individual” lends a rhetorical as well as a political unity to her writings. However, this focus on the individual in Roy’s nonfiction is not to be confused or even conflated with the idea of individualism. Instead, this tendency is a move towards a collective, a kind of what Benedict Anderson would call “ethical universal” that does not deny the variability of human wants but rather integrates them as the real historical ground on which that ethical universal must be established (Anderson 29). The focus, though, is on the individual, it is meant to transcend the egotistical desires and selfish demands to incorporate the whole of humanity with a particular attention devoted to the marginalized groups. Again, the focus is not on the individual as the writer but the oppressed and subaltern individual as the subject matter of her writing. In this manner when Roy re-centres the individual she comes close to Said’s notion of humanism which considers speaking with and representing the dominated groups central to the job of writers and academicians.

Roy’s “The End of Imagination”, written at the time of nuclear tests by India and Pakistan, delves into the negative implications of the testing of nuclear weapons, and the subsequent disastrous consequences of such an act on humanity at large. The essay also slices open the link between the neoliberal, the communal and the partisan government forces whose nefarious policies fuel communal frenzy among its own people. According to Roy, the nuclear weapons portend the end of imagination and a fearful curtailment of all the freedoms and liberties that humanism stands for. Similarly, in “The Reincarnation of Rumpelstiltskin” she exposes the neoliberal policies of the governments to privatize the natural resources which very dangerously impact the millions whose lives directly depend on the access to those natural resources. The essay, while it critiques privatization, also exposes the nexus between financial institutions and the “ruling elites of the third world” (Roy 169). The non-citizens and non-people are left at the mercy of profit-oriented policies of governments and corporate houses, thus ending their freedoms. Their end of freedom and agency is signified by a loss of choice for those individuals.

In sum, Roy’s attempts at the revival of freedom and agency for the disadvantaged are constitute of the essential function of writers and intellectuals as envisaged by Said in his theories of humanism and intellectual. Her speaking for and speaking with the subaltern make her one of the global voices which are providing a critique of global capitalism and neoliberal policies. This makes her the undaunted face of global movements for justice.

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