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## Narratives of Dissent: Politics and Protest in Arundhati Roy's Non-Fiction Writings

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### Abstract

This paper explores the role of Arundhati Roy's non-fiction as a site of political dissent and protest in postcolonial India. Moving beyond her celebrated debut novel *The God of Small Things* (1997), Roy has consistently intervened in public discourse through essays, speeches, and activist writings. Works such as *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* (2001), *An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire* (2005), *Listening to Grasshoppers* (2009), and *Walking with the Comrades* (2011) illustrate her refusal to separate literature from politics. Her essays protest against globalization, neoliberal reforms, militarization, religious nationalism, environmental exploitation, and the silencing of marginalized voices. By employing a style that fuses lyrical prose with sharp political critique, Roy challenges both state authority and global hegemonies. This paper argues that Roy's non-fiction writings between 1998 and 2016 constitute a narrative of dissent, one that positions her simultaneously as a literary figure and a public intellectual. It further examines the reception of her writings, including praise for her courage and criticism for her radical stances. Ultimately, Roy's non-fiction corpus reveals the possibilities and limits of political protest in literature, underscoring the power of words in shaping resistance.

**Keywords:** Arundhati Roy, Dissent, Protest Literature, Political Writing

### 1. Introduction: Literature as Resistance

Arundhati Roy's non-fiction emerges as one of the most powerful voices of dissent in contemporary Indian literature, situating itself at the intersection of politics, social justice, and resistance. While Roy is widely celebrated for her Booker Prize-winning novel *The God of Small Things* (1997), her non-fictional interventions have had an equally profound impact, particularly in articulating the realities of state violence, corporate exploitation, ecological devastation, and the suppression of marginalized communities. Her essays—such as *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* (2001), *Listening to Grasshoppers* (2009), *Broken Republic* (2011), and *Capitalism: A Ghost Story* (2014)—unflinchingly critique the Indian state, exposing the contradictions between the rhetoric of democracy and the lived realities of oppression. Roy positions herself as both a writer and a public intellectual, using her craft as a political tool to question the consensus manufactured by power structures, whether in the context of globalization, militarization, or caste and class hierarchies. Through her sharp prose, she reclaims the role of the writer as a



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truth-teller who refuses complicity, thereby shaping her works into narratives of dissent that challenge dominant national and global discourses. Her non-fiction is not simply reportage; it is a passionate engagement with injustice, imbued with empathy for the oppressed and a fierce commitment to exposing the hypocrisies of the powerful.

At the heart of Roy's non-fiction lies the politics of protest, which manifests in her solidarity with resistance movements, her critique of neoliberal capitalism, and her interrogation of nationalism and state power. She gives voice to Adivasis resisting displacement due to mining projects, Kashmiris facing militarized occupation, and Dalits struggling against systemic oppression, framing their struggles as central to any understanding of democracy in India. Her writings blur the line between activism and literature, embodying what may be described as an "aesthetics of resistance," where language itself becomes an act of defiance. Roy's dissent, however, is not limited to the Indian context; it resonates globally, critiquing imperialism, corporate globalization, and wars waged in the name of freedom. By foregrounding the silenced, the displaced, and the disenfranchised, her non-fiction interrogates the moral foundations of modern nation-states and capitalist systems, while urging readers to rethink justice and humanity beyond narrow political frameworks. Thus, *Narratives of Dissent: Politics and Protest in Arundhati Roy's Non-Fiction Writings* seeks to explore how her essays and interventions embody the literature of resistance—texts that not only document the fractures of the present but also envision a more equitable future. Roy's work demonstrates how non-fiction, far from being neutral, becomes an active site of political struggle, challenging readers to see dissent as essential to both democracy and the act of writing itself.

## 2. Historical Context: Post-Liberalization India and Globalization

The year 1991 marked a turning point in India's socio-economic trajectory, as the government initiated sweeping liberalization reforms in response to a balance-of-payments crisis. These reforms opened India to the global market, emphasizing privatization, deregulation, and foreign investment. While celebrated as the dawn of a "new India" with prospects of rapid modernization and consumer affluence, liberalization also produced new hierarchies of exclusion. Economic growth was uneven, concentrating wealth in urban centers and among privileged classes, while simultaneously deepening poverty and displacement among rural and marginalized communities. The privatization of natural resources, land acquisitions for industrial corridors, and large-scale mining projects in tribal regions triggered mass displacements and ecological devastation. These upheavals laid bare the contradictions of a development model that equated progress with capitalist expansion, while disregarding human and environmental costs.

At the same time, post-liberalization India witnessed the growing influence of Hindu nationalist politics, led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its affiliates. This ideological shift culminated in heightened communal violence, most notably the 2002 Gujarat riots, and in the



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increasing use of majoritarian rhetoric to define citizenship and nationhood. Militarization also intensified in conflict zones such as Kashmir and the Northeast, where dissent was often criminalized and protests met with state repression. Thus, the post-1991 landscape was characterized by the dual processes of globalization and authoritarian nationalism—both of which reshaped democracy into a fragile and contested space.

Arundhati Roy's non-fiction must be understood against this backdrop. Her essays are not abstract intellectual exercises but urgent responses to these structural transformations. From critiquing the nuclear nationalism of the late 1990s to exposing the human cost of corporate globalization in Adivasi lands, Roy confronts the ideological narratives of progress and security that dominate post-liberalization India. Simultaneously, she situates India's trajectory within global networks of imperialism, particularly American militarism and neoliberal capitalism, thus linking local dissent to transnational struggles. In this way, her writings become not only chronicles of protest but also interventions that reframe the historical moment from the standpoint of the dispossessed.

### 3. Arundhati Roy: From Fiction to Non-Fiction

Arundhati Roy's literary journey underwent a significant shift after the overwhelming success of her debut novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997). Having established herself as a novelist of global acclaim, Roy could have continued to occupy the secure domain of literary fiction. However, she soon recognized that the escalating injustices around her demanded a more direct mode of engagement. Her first major non-fictional intervention, *The End of Imagination* (1998), came in response to India's nuclear tests, where she denounced the celebration of nuclear nationalism as a dangerous and destructive triumph. For Roy, remaining silent in such a moment would have meant complicity; thus, her transition from fiction to non-fiction was not a stylistic experiment but a moral necessity.

Unlike many writers who maintain a division between literary creativity and political activism, Roy consciously dissolved the boundary between the two. She embraced a hybrid role as both writer and activist, situating her essays in solidarity with grassroots struggles, including anti-dam movements, Adivasi resistance against mining, and the fight for justice in Kashmir. Through this, Roy carved out a unique intellectual space where literature did not retreat into aesthetic autonomy but actively participated in public debates and mass mobilizations. Her non-fiction became a platform through which silenced voices could find articulation, positioning her as both a chronicler of dissent and an active participant in resistance.

This trajectory also reveals her broader philosophy of writing. For Roy, literature is not an isolated pursuit but an ethical practice that must respond to historical urgencies. She often emphasizes that art cannot exist in a vacuum while violence, displacement, and injustice unfold in the real world. By embodying the fusion of art and activism, Roy redefined the vocation of the



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writer in contemporary India, refusing the neutrality often expected of public intellectuals. Her shift from fiction to non-fiction thus represents not merely a change in genre but a profound reorientation of her literary purpose toward protest, justice, and accountability.

## 4. Style and Voice in Roy's Political Essays

One of the most striking features of Arundhati Roy's non-fiction is her distinct style, which combines journalistic precision with literary eloquence. Her essays are marked by lyrical intensity, where metaphors, irony, and rhetorical questions transform political critique into a form of poetic resistance. Roy's writing does not merely present facts; it dramatizes them, infusing narratives of injustice with emotional resonance and moral urgency. This stylistic hybridity distinguishes her essays from conventional political commentary, making them both persuasive and aesthetically compelling. For instance, in *Capitalism: A Ghost Story* (2014), Roy deploys vivid imagery to portray global capitalism as a spectral force haunting societies, exposing the stark realities of inequality in ways that transcend mere statistics.

Her voice is also defined by its sharp irony and biting satire, which she uses to unmask the absurdities of state power and corporate greed. She frequently asks rhetorical questions that force readers to confront uncomfortable truths about democracy, nationalism, and justice. This strategy not only challenges dominant narratives but also implicates readers, compelling them to rethink their own position in structures of privilege and complicity. At the same time, her prose is inclusive and accessible, ensuring that her essays resonate not just with scholars and policymakers but also with activists, students, and ordinary citizens.

Equally important is the emotional texture of her writing. Roy often situates herself within the narrative, acknowledging her subjectivity and personal stake in the struggles she describes. This lends authenticity and intimacy to her political essays, preventing them from becoming detached analyses. Instead, they embody what might be called an "aesthetics of empathy," where the suffering of others is rendered palpable through literary craft. By combining facts, imagery, and moral passion, Roy redefines political writing as a form of literature that can move as well as inform, provoke as well as persuade. Ultimately, her style ensures that dissent is not only an intellectual act but also an artistic one—one that challenges hegemonic discourse while affirming the power of words to resist and reimagine.

## 5. Protest Against Globalization and Empire

In *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* (2001), Arundhati Roy develops one of her most forceful critiques of globalization, situating India's economic trajectory within larger patterns of global empire. She identifies how neoliberal policies, framed as "reforms" and "progress," mask processes of dispossession that enrich corporations at the expense of the poor. Roy illustrates how multinational companies, aided by the Indian state, commodify natural resources such as water, forests, and minerals, dispossessing rural communities while entrenching economic



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inequalities. For Roy, globalization is not an abstract economic model but a lived reality for millions of displaced people who lose access to land and livelihood in the name of development. Roy connects these processes to imperial structures, particularly the global dominance of the United States, whose military and economic policies reinforce corporate hegemony worldwide. She draws parallels between India's internal displacements and global wars fought in the name of freedom and democracy, arguing that both reflect the logic of empire. Her writing critiques not only the economic injustices of globalization but also its cultural and ideological dimensions, exposing how neoliberalism shapes desires, aspirations, and forms of consent. Roy insists that globalization's triumphalist narrative conceals its violent underside: hunger, inequality, and ecological devastation.

By globalizing dissent, Roy reframes India's struggles as part of a planetary resistance against empire. Her essays highlight the connections between peasant movements in India, indigenous struggles in Latin America, and anti-war protests across the world. This cosmopolitan vision challenges the compartmentalization of local and global issues, insisting that resistance must transcend national boundaries. Thus, Roy's critique of globalization is not only a denunciation of neoliberal capitalism but also a call for solidarity among the oppressed across geographies. She demonstrates how literature can become a transnational site of protest, amplifying voices silenced by both state and corporate power.

## 6. Environmental Justice and the Narmada Movement

Roy's engagement with environmental activism reached its height with her involvement in the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), a grassroots movement opposing large dam projects on the Narmada River. In her celebrated essay *The Greater Common Good* (1999), she denounced the human and ecological costs of these dams, which promised electricity and irrigation but displaced hundreds of thousands of Adivasi and rural families. Roy's intervention was groundbreaking because she foregrounded the lived experiences of the displaced, narrating their struggles in stark contrast to the technocratic language of policy-makers who viewed them as "collateral damage." Her critique dismantled the state's narrative of development as neutral progress, exposing it instead as an instrument of dispossession and violence.

Roy situates the Narmada struggle within broader questions of justice, democracy, and sustainability. She argues that projects like large dams epitomize a model of development that prioritizes elite consumption and industrial growth while sacrificing the rights and survival of the marginalized. For Roy, this reveals a fundamental paradox of modern democracy: its rhetoric of equality coexists with systematic exclusions, where the most vulnerable are silenced in decision-making processes that affect their lives most directly. Her writing transforms the NBA into more than a localized protest; it becomes symbolic of the clash between two visions of progress—one driven by capitalist growth, the other rooted in ecological balance and social justice.





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What distinguishes Roy's contribution is her ability to humanize environmental debates. By weaving stories of individual suffering and community resilience, she injects empathy and urgency into what might otherwise remain technical discussions about development. Her prose reveals the human cost of dams in a way that statistical data cannot. In doing so, Roy reframed environmentalism in India, bringing it into mainstream discourse and demonstrating that ecological justice cannot be separated from questions of democracy, human rights, and economic equity.

## 7. Militarization, Kashmir, and State Violence

Among Roy's most controversial writings are her essays on Kashmir, where she directly challenges India's dominant nationalist narrative. In *Azadi: The Only Thing Kashmiris Want* (2011) and other interventions, Roy exposes the realities of militarization, human rights abuses, and systemic silencing of Kashmiri voices. She portrays the Valley as one of the most densely militarized zones in the world, where everyday life is shaped by checkpoints, curfews, arbitrary detentions, and extrajudicial killings. By foregrounding the testimonies of Kashmiris, Roy insists that their demand for "azadi" (freedom) must be taken seriously, rather than dismissed as separatism or sedition.

Her writings interrogate the contradictions of Indian democracy, which prides itself on constitutional freedoms yet deploys overwhelming state power to crush dissent. Roy highlights how the media, political elites, and middle-class opinion often collude to uphold a nationalist consensus that denies Kashmiri self-determination. By breaking this silence, she exposed herself to immense criticism, including charges of anti-nationalism and sedition. Yet, for Roy, bearing witness to injustice is a writer's ethical responsibility, regardless of the personal costs.

Beyond Kashmir, her critiques extend to the militarization of other regions, including central India, where paramilitary operations target Adivasi communities resisting mining corporations. She identifies a broader pattern: the use of military and police power to secure resources, suppress dissent, and maintain the authority of the state. This, she argues, reveals the limits of liberal democracy, which too often masks coercion with the rhetoric of law and order.

Roy's insistence on amplifying marginalized voices challenges readers to confront uncomfortable truths about nationhood, identity, and justice. By placing Kashmir at the center of her critique, she destabilizes the celebratory narratives of India as the "world's largest democracy," insisting instead that democracy must be measured by its treatment of the most silenced and oppressed.

## 8. Gender, Democracy, and Human Rights

While Arundhati Roy is often read as a critic of globalization, militarization, and nationalism, her writings also foreground the intersectional dimensions of gender, caste, and class. She consistently shows how structural violence disproportionately impacts women and marginalized



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communities, who bear the brunt of displacement, communal conflict, and economic exploitation. For Roy, these inequalities are not incidental but foundational to the way democracy functions in India, revealing its persistent exclusions.

In her essays on communal violence, Roy points out how women's bodies become symbolic battlegrounds for religious and nationalist identities, making them targets of sexual violence during riots and conflicts. Similarly, in writings on displacement, she highlights how women are doubly victimized: losing access to land and livelihood while shouldering the burden of caring for families in precarious conditions. Roy situates these experiences within broader structures of patriarchy, arguing that women's oppression cannot be disentangled from caste and class hierarchies.

Roy also critiques how mainstream human rights discourses often marginalize women's experiences, focusing narrowly on legal frameworks while ignoring everyday survival struggles. By weaving women's voices into her narratives, she challenges readers to recognize that democracy cannot be meaningful if it remains blind to gendered injustices. Her emphasis is not only on victimization but also on women's agency and resilience, which she portrays as central to grassroots resistance movements.

Through this intersectional critique, Roy reframes democracy as a practice that must actively dismantle hierarchies rather than merely proclaim formal equality. She insists that human rights discourse must address structural inequalities, not just individual violations. In doing so, her work aligns with feminist and subaltern perspectives that link the personal with the political. Roy demonstrates that struggles for justice must be holistic, recognizing how gender, caste, and class together shape the lived realities of oppression and resistance in India.

## **9. Case Studies of Major Non-Fiction Works**

### **9.1 *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* (2001)**

A collection that critiques nuclear nationalism, globalization, and militarization, positioning Roy as a global public intellectual.

### **9.2 *An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire* (2005)**

Essays that interrogate U.S. imperialism, global capitalism, and India's complicity in global injustice.

### **9.3 *Listening to Grasshoppers* (2009)**

Focuses on rising fascism, communal violence, and the erosion of democratic ideals in India.

### **9.4 *Walking with the Comrades* (2011)**

A firsthand account of Roy's time with Maoist insurgents in central India, challenging state narratives about insurgency and terrorism.

## **10. Reception, Controversy, and Criticism**



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Roy's non-fiction has received both acclaim and condemnation. Admirers laud her courage and ability to articulate uncomfortable truths, while critics accuse her of being anti-national or oversimplifying complex issues. This section analyzes the polarized responses to her writings, situating them within debates about the role of writers in political activism.

## **11. Comparative Perspectives: Roy and Other Dissenting Voices**

This section compares Roy's activism with other dissenting intellectuals such as Mahasweta Devi, Vandana Shiva, and Noam Chomsky. The aim is to situate her within a broader tradition of protest literature and intellectual resistance.

## **12. Pedagogical and Sociocultural Implications**

Roy's non-fiction has found a place in academic curricula, particularly in courses on postcolonial studies, political writing, and human rights. Her works challenge students and readers to rethink democracy, development, and justice. They also expand the notion of literature as a tool for activism.

## **13. Conclusion**

Arundhati Roy's non-fiction represents one of the most compelling bodies of dissenting literature in contemporary India, where the act of writing itself becomes an intervention against dominant ideologies of power, progress, and nationalism. Across her essays, Roy unmask the contradictions of post-liberalization India, exposing how neoliberal reforms, globalization, and corporate expansion have deepened inequalities, dispossessed communities, and devastated the environment, while simultaneously critiquing how these processes are legitimized through the rhetoric of democracy and development. Her engagement with movements such as the Narmada Bachao Andolan, her searing critiques of militarization and state violence in Kashmir, and her interrogation of U.S. imperialism and global capitalism reveal a consistently transnational vision that links local struggles with global patterns of injustice. By weaving together reportage, metaphor, irony, and moral urgency, she develops a distinctive style that is at once poetic and polemical, inviting readers to see dissent not merely as resistance but as an ethical necessity in the face of systemic violence. Moreover, Roy foregrounds the intersectionality of oppression, emphasizing how women, Dalits, Adivasis, and other marginalized groups disproportionately suffer under structures of patriarchy, caste, and class, thereby expanding the discourse on democracy and human rights. Her non-fiction ultimately demonstrates that literature cannot be divorced from politics, for words have the power to expose, resist, and reimagine. In refusing neutrality, Roy redefines the role of the writer as both witness and participant in struggles for justice, challenging the comforts of silence and complicity. *Narratives of Dissent: Politics and Protest in Arundhati Roy's Non-Fiction Writings* thus underscores how her essays constitute a radical archive of resistance, one that not only critiques existing systems of oppression but also gestures toward alternative visions of justice, equality, and freedom. Roy's writings remind us





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that protest is not peripheral but central to democracy, and that the responsibility of intellectual and literary work lies in amplifying the voices that power seeks to erase. Her contribution to political literature affirms that dissent, far from being a threat to democracy, is its most vital expression, ensuring that the ideals of justice and freedom remain alive in both public consciousness and literary imagination.

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