



ARUNDHATI ROY'S THE END OF IMAGINATION: A STUDY IN THEME AND TECHNIQUE

Dr. Vinod Kumar Singh* Dr. Anjani Kumar Mishra**

*Professor & Head, Department of English & Foreign Languages DSMNR University, Lucknow.

**V.B.S. Purvanchal University, Jaunpur.

Arundhati Roy is a homegrown writer, sensitive, precocious and committed to the causes which uphold human dignity and believe in the principle of individual's right to lead his own life in the least regimented way prescribed by the 'haves' in the society. She could not sustain her fictional creativity so far, beyond her maiden novel *The God of small Things*. Not that her imagination failed her but probably immediately after 1997 she was drawn into the issues of common cause like the **Narmada Bachao Movement** of Medha Patkar and other like-minded persons who waged incessant battles against the proponents of big ventures be it dams behind the façade of cheap hydro-electricity projects or mechanized fishing conglomerate with multinational connections. The prospects of these socio-political agitations in which the poor common men and women of humble means occupied the central focus are evident in her novel which won her the Booker Prize. Velutha in the novel becomes the symbol of the desperate struggle for survival against the overpowering odds created by men, socio-political agencies which are biased heavily against the have-nots and the humble. While she was busy brooding over the predicament of persons like Velutha, there occurred an event which to her appeared as a monumental folly on the part of the Indian government. The event was the nuclear explosion of 1998 at Pokhran in Rajasthan. Roy who seems to believe in the good of the 'last man' in the lowest range of society just could not understand the logic of conducting the test as it is a highly money-intensive project. And the net result is only a shameful folly.

In her essay entitled "The End of Imagination" Roy has given vent to her opposition to the proliferation of nuclear arms. The nuclear tests, she is convinced, signify the end of our imagination. Roy gives her own justification for writing her essay "The End of Imagination". She feels it to be a bounden duty of everyone who can 'write well' to say something against the nuclear explosions and arms so that one may justify his mental faculties which are so unique and singular among the creatures of the planet. She also knows that as a writer of fiction she might have remained in her job but the call to duty of opposing the nuclear menace is too great even for a fiction writer whose stock in trade is originality:

May 1998. It'll go down in history books, provided, of course, we have history books to go down in. Provided, of course, we have a future. There's nothing new or original left to be said about nuclear weapons. There can be nothing more humiliating for a writer of fiction to have to do than restate a case that has, over the years, already been made by other people in other parts of the world and made passionately, eloquently and knowledgeably.¹

Fully conscious of her maiden success with her maiden work powerful enough to bag the Booker Prize, she is compulsively drawn to the existential dilemma of 'to be or not to be' because nuclear weaponry is a matter of paramount human concern as it endangers the very existence of our planet and its life. That is why as a novelist "she is prepared to grovel because:

... in the circumstances, silence would be indefensible. So those of you who are willing: let's pick our parts, put on these discarded costumes and speak our second-hand lines in this sad second-hand play. (p.4)

Roy knows that what she has to say has already been said by the social and humanist thinkers, scientists, politicians and by the millions who were killed, impaired and mutilated by the Bomb in the Second War. But as living and thinking human beings, she feels, we must raise our voice and tell the same tale of caution and warning even at the cost of repeating what others have already said. Any failure, reticence or half-hearted murmuring would open us to a catastrophe in which the problem is of survival not only of ours but "the end of our children and our children's children." She says,

But let's not forget that the stakes we're playing for are huge. Our fatigue and our shame could mean the end of us. The end of our children and our children's children. Of everything we love. We have to reach within ourselves and find the strength to think. To fight. (p.4)

The irony of the situation is that we are "pitifully behind the times-in our ability to grasp the true nature of nuclear weapons" especially in the face of the popular perception that nuclear bomb is just another hand grenade to destroy Pakistan or vice-versa.

Arundhati Roy's imagination perceives the horror hidden for most of us, and that explains her unusual alarm with which she takes the event. She is probably alarmed by the psychological states of India and Pakistan which abound in 'tired, dejected,



heartbroken people' which may in desperation trigger off a war which both are incapable of comprehending the vital dilemma involved. After using a number of "If only" clauses she comes to state it:

If only nuclear war was the kind of war in which countries battle countries and men battle men. But it isn't. If there is anuclear 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. Their wrath will be terrible.

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. When everything there is to burn has burned and the fires die, smoke will rise and shut out the sun. The earth will be enveloped in darkness. There will be no day. Only interminable night. ... Only rats and cockroaches will breed and multiply and compete with foraging, relict humans for what little food there is.

... What shall we do then, those of us who are still alive? Burned and blind and bald and ill, carrying the cancerous carcasses of our children in our arms, where shall we go? What shall we eat? What shall we drink? What shall we breathe? (pp. 5-6)

Thus, the production of atomic weapons is a colossal waste of human energy and national wealth. She appears to be a follower of Mahatma Gandhi who believed in truth and non-violence. The monster of war can be killed through love, peace and harmony. In this way her attitude is very close to A. Gopal Krishnan who observes:

There was a realization that the country's real security didn't lie in possessing a few crude nuclear weapons, but in being able to feed, clothe and shelter its large population and provide the people with basic amenities such as drinking water and basic health care. Those governments also gave some weightage to the fact that having attained independence through a prolonged non-violent struggle based on the principle of 'ahims', India shouldn't stray into the race for developing and deploying weapons of mass destruction with a clearly expounded abhorrence to weapons of mass destruction and an abiding conviction in total nuclear disarmament and elimination of nuclear weapons everywhere. India had championed this cause among the international community in spite of the Pokharan I Test.²

The End of Imagination shows that Arundhati Roy is a great champion for the cause of peace and prosperity, harmony and integration. The Essay realistically deals with the problems arising out of nuclearization of India. She agrees with pearl S. Buck who rightly remarks:

War and killing achieve nothing but loss, and that a noble end is assured only if the means to attain it are of a place with it and also noble.³

She pooh-poohs the idea of India surviving the war advanced by the Health, Environment and Safety Group of the BARC but their logic and suggestions are found by Roy nothing more than the day-dreams of the mentally deranged persons. She is puzzled to see that her sensible and objective appraisals of the nuclear war is taken as "Doomsday Prophet Hyperbole" because the proponents strongly believe in their foolhardy belief that there will be no war at all because our weapon capability will give us that imaginary guarantee called 'deterrence' which as a theory "has some fundamental flaws" (p.8).

Roy goes on to build up a rationally secured imaginative account of the brittle theory of so called 'deterrence'. Its first flaw is that it works on presumption but the resourcefulness of the human mind and heart are very often beyond presumption. The theory "presumes a complete sophisticated understanding of the psychology of your enemy. It assumes that what deters you (the fear of annihilation) will deter them. What about those who are not deterred by that? The suicide- bomber psyche..." (p.8)

Moreover the given instability of governments both in India and Pakistan leaves so many loose ends and throws up many moot questions. Roy fears that the political option being limited for a party in power without even simple majority, the nuclear button may be used to ensure party ends.

The second flaw of the policy of deterrence is that it is 'premised on fear. But fear is premised on knowledge' (p.9). She is convinced that all talks of fear as conducive to deterrence is but a hoax. We don't fear, but we fear knowledge of the unimaginable scale of devastation which has, in reality, propagated by the endless demonstration, tireless confrontational agitation through the globe that has led to this realization of the frightening scenario. It is not the fear but the knowledge so made public that has "averted or perhaps only postponed nuclear war." For the illiterate, ignorant peoples of India and



Pakistan the word deterrence just has no meaning. She asserts: “The Theory of Deterrence is nothing but a perilous joke in a world where iodine pills are prescribed as a prophylactic for nuclear irradiation” (pp. 9-10). It may be recalled that the pill was prescribed by BARC in case of hazardous radiation.

Her objection to nuclear explosion by India is caused by her fear that soon other countries will follow suit because every country has, like India, its “borders and beliefs” and the day is not far off when our planet “will bristle with beautiful missiles”. It is just foolish, Roy thinks, to believe that nuclear weapons are deadly only if they are used. The fact on the contrary is that their very existence is fraught with dangers. It “pervades our thinking. Control our behavior. Control our behavior. Administer our societies. Inform our dreams” (p.12) and that is why she pleads “to stand up and say something. Never mind if it’s been said before. Speak up on your own behalf. Take it very personally” (p.12).

Arundhati Roy prior to the Indian explosion held America responsible for the irresponsible sin of nuclear tests. But when she returns after a short visit to the West for Booker Prize investiture ceremony, she is shell-shocked to see that irresponsible reactions by even writers, painters, journalists who seem to have said a ‘good bye’ to reason in praising the event of nuclear test by India. The headlines in papers like ‘Explosion of Self-Esteem’, Road to Resurgence, and ‘A moment of pride’ simply indicate that fascism has ‘entered our homes’. Roy fears the repercussions. “In 1975 one year after India first dipped her toe into the nuclear sea, Mrs. Gandhi declared the Emergency.” After the 1998 Pokharan Test danger signals are there in terms of Hindu India settling scores with its oppressors of yore—the Muslim Pakistan. The bogey of Hindu vs Muslim Bomb vitiating the human relationship may unleash potential forces of disturbing human relationship.

Roy knows that the sentimental question of national pride and the idea of nationalism, developed by Kipling and others in the heyday of British Imperialism, has seeped too deep among the countries of the world to be removed and forgotten easily. And that is why when she mentioned her project of writing the present essay to her friends and well-wishers, she was cautioned to be discreet and get her tax papers in order, lest the state may persecute her. Roy has the memories of the Emergency in India when thousands were arrested and detained without rhyme and reason. Luckily her apprehensions proved wrong. Probably she overestimated the impact of her “The End of Imagination.” She placed too high a premium on her celebrity status as a writer of *The God of Small Things* and hence her misconceived forebodings. She mentions it explicitly:

My papers are in order. My taxes are paid. But how can one not be vulnerable in a climate like this? Everyone is vulnerable. Accidents happen. There is safety only in acquiescence. As I write, I am filled with foreboding ... In 1997, I was one of the items being paraded in ... National Pride Parade. Among the others, much to my mortification, were a bomb-maker...I’m going to step out from under the fairy lights and say what’s on my mind. (Pp.20-21)

Roy feels dejected and her feelings are hurt as to a citizen of a country where emphasis has been on co-existence. She becomes a prey to ill-founded fears of a repetition of what happened during the Emergency in 1975. It is in this mood that she explains the purpose of her writing “The End of imagination”:

My world has died. And I write to mourn its passing. Admittedly, it was a flawed world... I myself have criticized unsparingly, but only because I loved it. It didn’t deserve to die...

I loved it simply because it offered humanity a choice. It was a rock out at sea. A stubborn chink of light that insisted that there was a different way of living. It was a functioning possibility. A real option. All that’s gone now. 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, because, after all, that’s what freedom is. Choice. (pp. 21-22).

Nuclear matter is a grave matter for any country. Nuclear test on 11 May 1998 was a hasty step and was conducted without consulting the army experts. Lt. Gen. (Retd.) Eric A. Vas said, “This momentous decision was taken solely on the advice of clever scientists and bureaucrats who lacked constitutional responsibility or accountability. The military chiefs hadn’t been consulted about a matter which had far-reaching security consequences.”⁴Roy rather exaggerates her reaction and comes to believe:

On 15 August 1997 we celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of India’s independence. From now on we can celebrate a future of nuclear bondage. (p.22).



Anyway in 1998, she didn't perceive the consequences of unipolarity and that is why the essay further examines the explicit reasons given by the Govt. of India for going for the test-explosion. The general reason is political expediency which does not carry much meaning for a pacifist like Roy as she puts the poser: "Why should it have been politically expedient" (p.22)The "three Official Reasons given are: China Pakistan and Exposing Western Hypocrisy." (p.22).

Roy admits that the issues are real but 'they aren't new. The only new thing on the old horizon is the Indian Government led by AtalBehariBajpai who, according to her, explained to the U.S.A. President the security considerations as being the main reason for the test. Arundhati Roy writes,

"Our Prime Minister says India's decision to go ahead with the nuclear tests was due to a 'deteriorating security environment.' He goes on to mention the war with China in 1962 and the 'three aggressions we have suffered in the last fifty years (from Pakistan). And for the last ten years we have been the victim of unremitting terrorism and militancy sponsored by it... Especially in Jammu and Kashmir." (p.22).

Arundhati Roy's humanistic feelings are not ready to reconcile as the above reasons and she tries to debunk them. The China question according to her is bogus as the Chief of The General Staff of Peoples' Liberation Army was with our chief of the Army Staff and there were no words of war. Even the war with Pakistan is now 27 years old. As for the Kashmir issue it is an issue like many others for which the Indian Govt. is much responsible. And these problems 'cannot and will not be solved by pointing nuclear missiles at Pakistan" (p.24). Moreover as the two countries share contagious borders we share the same air, water and sky and therefore "Any nuclear war with Pakistan will be a war against ourselves." Regarding the third reason viz. to expose the western hypocrisy Roy tells us that it is a well known fact: "Which decent human being on earth harbours any illusions about it? (P.24) The western nations "stand on the world's stage stark naked but... entirely unembarrassed." They are arrogant than hypocrite with 'more food, more money and larger bombs.' By joining the nuclear Club we have become the hypocrites. "We are the ones who've abandoned what was arguably a moral position" of knowing the technology and yet not making the bomb because we don't believe in them. To think that by possessing a bomb can take us to the exclusive club of the Superpowers is a folly as nonsensical as to demanding "to play in the World Cup finals simply because we have a ball" (p.26). It is foolish because even among the Superpowers the nation with "more money, more food, and more bombs" would be superior to others in the club. In any honest assessment India stands nowhere as the UNDP's 1997 Human Development Index places india at No. 138 out of 175 countries with its 400 million illiterate, 600 million without basic sanitation and 200 million having no drinking water. Roy asserts that the basic reason for going for the test is: "To prevent the state from crumbling, we need a national cause, and other than our currency.... We have none" (p.27). In her zeal she poses basic questions about the existence of Indian identity: "Is India Indians". Her arguments may look reasonable but on objective observation we feel that on such vital issues she should have better remained discreet. If there is no Indianans in India, why she should so full of regret about the values which Indian stood for? We feel difficulty in supporting her arguments about India without any identity:

The people who have a vital stake... in India having a single, lucid, cohesive national identity are the politicians... because... their career goal, is...to become that identity... If there isn't one, they have to manufacture one and persuade people to vote for it... The more morally bankrupt the politicians, the cruder the ideas of what that identity should be. (p.29)

Any talk of national identity appears farcical, according to Roy, because every individual can claim for himself a minority status. The result is that "The fissures... run vertically, horizontally and are layered... Fires, when they're lit, race along any one of these schisms, and... release tremendous bursts of political energy" resulting into the mob fury first utilized by Gandhi against the British and later by others especially Indira Gandhi who" made the genie a permanent State Guest" (pp.30-31). It was again used by BJP while demolishing the Babri Mosque structure. The same genie brought the nuclear explosion by using the rhetoric of insecurity and national cause.

Roy is critical of political parties in power both the Congress of Indira Gandhi and the BJP and how they hide themselves sometimes behind "tired platitudes" and "convent school rhetoric" and sometimes come out openly in support of their deeds somehow lacks the sincerity which otherwise characterize the matter and manner of the writer. Her writing smacks of prejudice and distasteful contempt. It somehow takes the skew away from her well presented anti-nuclear weapons arguments. Just one example is enough:

The BJP is, in some senses, a spectre that Indira Gandhi and the Congress created. Or, if you want to be less harsh, a spectre that fed and reared itself in the political spaces and communal suspicion that the Congress nourished... while Mrs.



Indira Gandhi played hidden games with politicians and their parties... The BJP... has chosen to light its fires directly on the streets and in the homes and hearts of people. It is prepared to do by day what the Congress would do only by night.... Could the hypocrisy of the Congress Party, the fact that it conducted its wretched affairs surreptitiously instead of openly, could that possibly mean there is a tiny glimmer of guilt somewhere?... Actually, no. No. (pp.31-32)

Roy sees the hypocrisy further in the BJP youth celebrating India's nuclear Bomb and simultaneously "condemning Western Culture by emptying crates of Coke and Pepsi into public drains." She refers to the Indophiles Claim that the bomb is in the Vedas and castigates them for accepting the western nuclear bomb.

Roy's whole punch seems to have lost its strength when she refers to such bizarre ideas. She dwells on the issue of whether India is a Hindu state or not because much before the Hindus there lived the Adivasis and that a lot of foreign elements have entered to leave anything indigenously Indian or Hindu. Any insistence on things Indian would mean preparing a "a practical list of things to ban and buildings to break." Roy gives a list with the confession "It'll need some research, but off the top of my head, here are a few suggestions." HumayunKabir is of the opinion that:

Till recently the Aryans were regarded as the earliest invaders of the Land. It was thought that they came to a country which was uncivilized and barbarian, but modern research has proved that there were invaders even before the Aryans poured into this land. They had evolved a civilization higher than that of the Aryans,... Today whatever is Indian, whether it be an idea, a word, a form of art, a political institution or social custom, is a blend of many different strains and elements.⁵

Thus the tribals are those people who may be called the real Hindu of the country.

Her suggestions are suggestions of impossibilities and we simply wonder whether this is the only thing that comes "off the top" of her head. She says:

They could begin by banning a number of ingredients from our cuisine: chillies (Mexico), tomatoes (Peru), potatoes (Bolivia)... Smoking will be out of the question. Tobacco came from North America.

Cricket, English and Democracy should be forbidden. Either Kabaddi or Khokho could replace cricket... All hospitals in which Western medicine is practiced... be banned... The railways dismantled. (pp. 35-36)

Her funny musings in this vein sometimes receives her ironical punch for which she has rare talent:

Needless to say, sending your children to university in the U.S., and rushing there yourself to have your prostate operated upon, will be a cognizable offence. (p.36)

Her conclusion on the issue is pointed and unambiguous:

There's no such thing as an Authentic India or a Real Indian. There is no Divine Committee that has the right to sanction one single, Authorized Version of what India is or should be... There are, and can only be, visions of India, various ways of seeing it-honest, dishonest, wonderful, absurd, modern, traditional male, female." (p.37).

After these stunted observations, she comes to her argument convincing by saying that the bomb is being made a symbol of national pride and achievement. The fact is that the majority of the Indian people just does not understand the nature of nuclear weapons. "Has anybody told them that nuclear war has nothing at all to do with their received notions of war"?(p.38). So the whole din is based on false glorification managed through misinformed misinformation. "...millions and millions who live in this country... have the right to make an informed decision about its fate, and as far as I can tell, nobody informed them about anything" (pp.39-40). The information is difficult to give because the horrors are too great for the language. In short her final appeal and message is clearly audible in her assertion:

The nuclear bomb is the most anti-democratic, anti-national, anti-human outright evil thing that man has ever made. If you are religious... this bomb is Man's challenge to God... This world of ours is 4,600 million years old. It could end in an afternoon. (pp.40-41)

The essay "The End of Imagination" is the anguished cry of a professed humanist. Her opinion and views may appear rather inconsiderate as Roy laments as if the world were lost. The world of imagination has always been at variance with the world



of reality. Her anguish and gloom has a literary parallel in William Hazlitt at the failure of Napoleon. Her feelings are similar to those of Hazlitt who came out on the street unshaven and uncouth on the fall of Napoleon. Denounced as a traitor Hazlitt held his views. Roy also seems to be in the same frame of mind when she declares:

If protesting against having a nuclear bomb implanted in my brain is anti-Hindu and anti-national, then I secede. I hereby declare myself an independent, mobile republic. I am a citizen of the earth. I own no territory. I have no flag... (p.21)

The above statement indicates the extreme stand of the essayist as is done in the spirit of the 17th century Pamphleteers and the 19th century Tractarianism. Such assertive stance of subjective nature somehow makes her impact rather blunt. Her argument appears based not on logic but obstinacy.

When Roy talks of Indian politics her aversion to party-politics takes control over her and she fails to give a cogent, coherent understanding of the Indian political life. She is not happy with the Left parties, shown so patently in her *The God of small things*. She does not hide her aversion to the rightist parties as well viz. the Congress and the BJP.

As of now, it is difficult to understand her argument and trust her views especially in a world which has unfortunately become only unipolar. We very much doubt if without that nuclear power the countries of Asia could stand the injustices inflicted by America as in the case of Iraq. In fact the essay *The End of Imagination* was written in 1998 but the geo-political situation in the world has much changed since. The U.S.A. has come to perfect the indecency of bullying the smaller countries and has taken upon itself the task of being the culprit and also the judge. In this changed perspective we are yet to hear from Arundhati Roy on the issue. There is no doubt that the issues she raises are vital and the very planet is at stake but then we also know that sometimes things refuse to remain under control and one is forced to take suicidal decisions.

To be precise Arundhati Roy succeeds as a humanist with the gusto and force of her style. Her views on basic issues are clear, pointed and straight and she minces no words in expressing them. She fulfils the objective, set by herself in the initial stage of the essay that a time has come when every right thinking person should speak out against the nukes because they are crucial for all forms of life on our earth.

References

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