

REVIEW

The Ministress of the Political Essay — A Review of Arundhati Roy's "Azadi"

by Sam Dapanas

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Arundhati Roy

'Arundhati Roy is
one of the greatest
writers of our time'
NAOMI KLEIN



AZADI

Freedom • Fascism • Fiction

In her 2020 collection of essays, Indian novelist, activist and essayist Arundhati Roy takes up questions of language, cultural belonging, literature and politics, up to the 2020 COVID pandemic. While taking the form of political essays, a form of writing with a long tradition in the English language, Roy’s pieces weave in and out of genres, chasing hard questions and suggesting provocative answers, in a never-ending confrontation between the colonial legacy of the Empire and the rich and multi-faceted identities of post-colonial countries.

I first read Arundhati Roy in a postcolonial literature class as an undergraduate English major, thanks to my Asianist professor back then who is a dramaturgist, theater director, and cultural studies scholar. Despite the grueling experience of reading *The God of Small Things*’ first 100 pages (god, yes it was!), I loved it so much that I wrote a lengthy book review — one of the class’s final requirements — about it. Years later, her second novel would come out. I bought one of the first copies that arrived at the local bookstore. Reading Arundhati Roy’s nonfiction and essays in *Azadi* (which means ‘freedom’ in several Persian languages) and in *My Seditious Heart: Collected Nonfiction* (2019), I must say it made me understand further where the characters from her fiction, some nitpicked from real people in her life, are coming from. “In What Language Does Rain Fall In Tormented Cities?” the essay, a homage to a line from Pablo Neruda’s *Libro de Preguntas* (or *The Book of Questions*), which serves as the first chapter of *Azadi: Fascism, Freedom, Fiction*, Roy gives us a glimpse of her creative process, pre- and post-writing, behind *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, her second novel, which was published in 2017.



Arundhati Roy at Harvard University in 2010 © CC

Said piece was possibly the essay that stroke the strongest chord in me and that had resonance in me as a reader. Coming from a multilingual, if not translingual, community — outside the capital Manila, a

typical Filipino child would learn English and (Tagalog-based) Filipino in school and the media, the native tongue at home, and because of the well-intentioned, poorly executed Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB MLE) policy, possibly another non-Tagalog language taught in school if one’s mother language is not the same dominant one in the region where one lives in — I know exactly the ‘slow violence’ of linguistic genocide. Perhaps as a rumination on her case, Roy wrote:

I fell to wondering what my mother tongue actually was. What was — is — the politically correct, culturally apposite, and morally appropriate language in which I ought to think and write? It occurred to me that my mother was actually an alien, with fewer arms than Kali perhaps but many more tongues. English is certainly one of them. My English has been widened and deepened by the rhythms and cadences of my alien mother's other tongues. I say alien because there's not much that is organic about her. Her nation-shaped body was first violently assimilated and then violently dismembered by an imperial British quill. I also say alien because the violence unleashed in her name on those who do not wish to belong to her (Kashmiris, for example), as well as on those who do (Indian Muslims and Dalits, for example), makes her an extremely unmotherly mother.

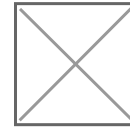
In *A Brief History of the Political Essay*, David Bromwich, himself a scholar of Western literary and philosophical canon, locates the political essay within the Euro-American tradition, from Jonathan Swift's satires to Virginia Woolf's memoirs, as having "never been a clearly defined genre." *Never been*. A body of writings across cultures and eras exists but there is no strict definition of what works are confined within it and what works on the outside are not. But in *Azadi*, Arundhati Roy shows us, in the words of another novelist from the Indian subcontinent, Salman Rushdie, how "the empire writes back." Her essays are incisive and at the same time, insightful and provocative, dissecting through the heart of the issue, asking the right questions with precision. In "The Language of Literature," for instance, Roy asks, "What's the place of literature?" Or what is its role in our current times which is heavily fraught with religious fundamentalism, the strengthening of the alt Far Right, socioeconomic inequalities and unrest, and even state-funded online disinformation which is prevalent in India and in my country, and possibly everywhere? Come 2020, all these have become layered with the Covid-19 pandemic, i.e. the hoarding of vaccine supply by the Global North, corruption in the midst of pandemic response, racism as evidenced by selective travel bans, as Roy has written in "The Pandemic Is A Portal," the last essay in the collection. True to her introduction, "Some of the essays in this volume have been written

through the eyes of a novelist and the universe of her novels.”

In the larger context of “self against fact” in contemporary nonfiction writing particularly in its subgenres of literary journalism and political essays, Roy shapes and reshapes her position as a witnessing “writer-activist” (which she says people label her) foregrounded by, quoting Nicole Walker in her

Creative Nonfiction magazine article *The Braided Essay as a Social Justice Action*, “new facts, and the facts of your personal story cut into the hard statistics of your paragraph” about political upheavals and ethnoreligious violence in India. I cite Walker because to me, the essays here, a few of them reworked versions of speeches and lectures she gave for the British Library and PEN America, to me, are in the braided form, the “most effective [form] when the political and the personal are trying to explain and understand each other ... to [pull] together two disparate ideas ... [a] form ... of resistance ... a form that expands the conversation, presses upon the hard lines of ideology.” In *Azadi*, Roy critiques across the political spectrum, from the fascist Right (the Hindi ultranationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) to the “casteist” Left (the Maoist Communist Party of India).

Despite, however, the bleakness of the textual realities of the essays and the lived experiences they portray, Roy, as in her novels *The God of Small Things* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, gives us a glimpse of hope, some sort of light at the end of a pitch-dark tunnel. “What lies ahead?” Roy asks and to which she answers, “Reimagining the world. Only that.”



"Azadi" by Arundhati Roy