Author-Activism: Philosophy of Dissent in the Writings of Arundhati Roy[1]

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Abstract

In this paper our analysis focuses on theorising "dissent" as a philosophical-political "moment" and studying the voice of "dissent" through the writings of Arundhati Roy. We argue through a close reading of Roy's texts that dissent is intrinsic to human thoughts and dialogues. Taking our cue from Robert Barsky's study of Noam Chomsky's life as a "life of dissent" and from Brian Martin's paper "Advice for the Dissident Scholar," in *Thought and Action,* Vol. 14, we argue that the term dissent is set in a complex interplay of multiple subjectivities. A dissenting voice is looked upon as a voice that goes against, rather than with the established norms of the society, and in extreme cases, is fiercely opposed. Taking these theoretical premises further into a *praxical* mode, we analyse Arundhati Roy's non-fictional works, and bring out the element of dissent, which is implicitly present in each of her essays. Roy's dissent, mainly political in nature, usually takes the form of scathing criticism – the expression of which is fearless and forthright. Our interpretation of Roy's works is in connection with the impact and the substantiality of her dissent.

Keywords

Non-fiction, Arundhati Roy, philosophy of dissent, South Asia, eco-consciousness, rhetoric

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Dissent is the highest form of patriotism (Howard Zinn; italics added)[4]

Theorising Dissent

Dissent remains an integral aspect of human thought and behaviour. As a theoretical term, it is significant because of the existence of a creative uniqueness, a distinctive individuality that forms the core of a dissenting voice. However, the rigorous engagement that "dissent" has with identity and identity formation requires a serious reflection through a study of texts and through a critical engagement with the term itself. We make an attempt to understand dissent in this paper by proposing such questions as "What is creative dissent?" and "Who is a dissident?" as the starting framework of our study. Our analysis focuses on theorising "dissent" as a philosophical-political "moment," and studying the voice of "dissent" in the essays of Arundhati Roy (1961-).

There are various ways in which the term "dissent" has been linguistically defined and understood. For instance, *The New Shorter Oxford Dictionary on Historical Principles* presents "dissent" as:

> **Dissent** *v.i.* **1.** Withhold assent or consent from a proposal, etc,; to express opposition (Foll. by *from,* (now *rare*) to.) LME. **2**. Think differently; have a different opinion, disagree. (Foll. by *from, in* a subject; *from with* a person.) M16. **3**. *spec.* Differ in religious doctrine or practice, esp. from a prevailing or established Church. M16. **4**. Be at loggerheads; quarrel M16-M18. **5**. Differ in meaning, nature, form, etc., (*from*) M16-M17. (Brown 702-03)

We note that other definitions, for instance that by *Random House Compact Unabridged Dictionary,* also describe dissent on the similar grounds of "differ[ing] in sentiment or opinion, esp. from the majority" or being unique and individualistic in thoughts and ideas.[5]

Dissent is perceived as an aspect of an individual's attitude. A dissident is a person to whom usually characteristics such as a predisposition to disagree and differ from the widely held opinion are ascribed. The act of dissenting has been understood, to a large extent, as something that is limited to objecting at the prevalent views or opposing an establishment in any form of societal structure. In addition, the image of a dissident has been as a person whose

[4] As cited in Sharon Basco's July 3, 2002 interview with Howard Zinn, "Dissent in Pursuit of Equality, Life, Liberty and Happiness: An Interview with Howard Zinn."

[5] See *Random House Compact Dictionary* (Special Second Edition) (Random House Inc, New York, Copyright 1996, 1993, 1987) for the definitions of "dissent" 569.

views particularly do not conform to those collectively held by the organisation or the part of society with which he or she is associated.

The aspect that clearly emerges from a study of the linguistic interpretation of dissent is that the act of dissent centres on "withholding assent" or "disagreeing" because of an espousal of a different view. In our attempt to characterise dissent, we interpret those elements which are implicitly suggested by these definitions. Drawing our inferences from the definitions cited above, the following are the major characteristics of a dissident:

(1) Strong personal belief that a particular view, proposal, doctrine, etc. is flawed and must be opposed.
(2) Expressiveness or outspokenness.
(3) Rebellion against established norms.
(4) Espousal and pursuance of the dissident's own views, opinions, ideals, etc.

Robert Barsky in his biography, *Noam Chomsky: A Life of Dissent* (1997), studies Chomsky along these lines of being a "dissident." He attempts to understand the characteristics of a dissident that goes into the formation of Chomskian principles defining the turn of twentieth century linguistic and political philosophy. Chomsky has been known to have a "branded dissent" in his style of language and thought. In chapter five of Barsky's book, titled "The Intellectual as Comissar," he talks of the role of the "Academic" dissident and the dramatic moments of Chomsky's career as an academic that gave him the status of a dissident scholar:

> Chomsky adamantly rejected the assumption that a given group might have an intrinsic right to act aggressively simply because of its history: Israelis do not have the right to employ brutal tactics against the Palestinians because they themselves have been persecuted, the American government should not get away with terrorist activities because it allows for more debate than the Bolsheviks did, and the fundamental rights of individuals should not be expunged because their views don't correspond with those of the ruling elites. Though they may seem to be truisms, these basic tenets led Chomsky to engage in a number of high-pitched debates that began in the early 1960s and still continue. (Barsky, *Noam Chomsky: A Life of Dissent* 165-66)

Chomsky as a political and linguistic thinker and a radical himself provides a "touchstone" to the philosophy of dissent. The "Chomsky-Schützenberger theorem" with its connection between abstract algebra and languages, exemplifies the dissenting voice that constructively goes on to break the rigid class barriers between Human sciences and Mathematical sciences. Chomsky

has led what has been called a "life of dissent"[6] and his popularity as "a darling of political dissidents around the world"[7] in his course of activism against numerous issues puts him on a pedestal as an influential thinker. In the debate entitled "Science in the Dock," Chomsky himself uses the term "dissident" for certain parts of the intellectual tradition involving the Prophets:

> If you look at what the prophets were doing, they were what we would call dissident intellectuals. They were giving geopolitical critique, they were warning that the [Hebrew] kings were going to destroy the country. They were calling for support for suffering people, widows and orphans and so on. So they were what we call dissident intellectuals. (Chomsky, "Science in the Dock," *Science and Technology News*)

On a different note, the paper "An Advice for Dissident Scholars" by Brian Martin argues about the suppression of dissent that takes place particularly in scientific communities, and strategizes the grounds for defence by dissident scholars.[8] The definitions of "suppression of dissent" and "whistle-blowing,"[9] as well as Martin's view of whistle-blowers as "conscientious employees who see something wrong"[10] characterise the voice of dissent.

We wish to underscore the idea that these elements constitute an important basis on which a theoretical-creative understanding of dissent can be formulated. A dissident acts in the awareness that the view or proposal s/he is opposed to is worthy of opposition. This follows because the feeling of "disagreement" with the view or proposal might be shared by many, but the dissident is distinguished as a consequence of his/her expressiveness. A fundamental aspect is the presence of two convictions which form a source of motivation to the dissenting voice: (a) acceptance that disagreement and difference of opinion could exist regarding a proposal, policy, etc., and (b) this disagreement must be voiced.

Dissidents, in many cases,[11] step down and walk away, which is to say, resign or refuse to be associated with the proposal/opinion that they disagree

[6] See, Robert F. Barsky, *Noam Chomsky: A Life of Dissent.*
[7] See Robert F. Barsky, *Noam Chomsky: A Radical Works Beyond the Ivory Tower*, ix.
[8] Brian Martin, "Advice for Dissident Scholars." See http://www.bmartin.cc/pubs/98ta.html. Also published with editorial changes as "Advice for the Dissident Scholar," *Thought and Action* 14.1 (Spring 1998): 119-30.
[9] See Brian Martin "Suppression of Dissent."
[10] See Brian Martin, "Defending Dissent."
[11] As a Postscript to the essay "Greater Common Good," Arundhati Roy explains the status of dissenting voices within the dominant discourse of the Narmada movement. One of the judges dealing with the Narmada case (in the three judge bench) holds the dissenting voice and according to him the go-ahead with the dam building without rehabilitation is contrary to the policy and clearly constitutes a violation of the conditions of the clearance. Justice Bharucha continues to stand by his position, and she names it as "dissenting judgement."

with. They might continue to express their disapproval through methods such as withholding consent, or total withdrawal of involvement. In other cases, however, a dissident may choose to actively pursue his or her stand, and make arguments to convince others of its correctness. In such a case, the dissident is usually hard-pressed, out of an experience of facing hostility by the majority that often tends to suppress or side-line the dissenting voice.

A proclivity for enquiring what the majority (peers, etc.) agrees with, or simply acquiesces in, prompts the dissident to stand out in a crowd. This inquisitiveness and rebellion of the dissident gets pitted against the acquiescent and consenting voices around him or her. It is this fundamental difference which constitutes the core from where "dissent" as a philosophical principle emerges.

Dissent is both creative and critical in its expression. Particularly, the genre of non-fictional literary texts gives the space where argument and counter-argument could simultaneously exist, thus opening up the grounds for dissent.

As we thus theoretically conceptualise dissent, the necessity for understanding it at the level of practice also arises. While Chomsky's principles mark philosophical and political dissent, it would be useful to understand literary and cultural dissent in the South Asian political context. It is this space of texts and cultural contexts where resistance to dominant discourses find their roots. The complex nature of "Indian" context and the simultaneous existence of multiple fragments of thoughts and opinions construct a space for the dissident voice.

In contemporary Indian postcolonial writing in English, Arundhati Roy would figure as a prominent voice of dissent. Bishnupriya Ghosh in "Tallying Bodies: The Moral Math of Arundhati Roy's Non-fiction" analyses the complex nature of this "brand" dissidence that Roy has taken as a writer-identity for herself. Ghosh sums-up Roy's predicament as a dissident South Asian "woman" writer, stating; "In her commitment to the many, her own singularity has been a thorn in Roy's flesh" (Ghosh 128). She defends Roy's political dissent in the literary essays adding that, "Roy's non-fiction offers us the mathematics of justice, a valuable resource against the excesses of globalization" (Ghosh 145). On the other hand, Julie Mullaney in "Globalizing Dissent? Arundhati Roy, Local and Postcolonial Feminisms in the Transnational Economy," assesses the "issues" of Roy's dissident arguments as sometimes "problematic 'rhetorical' conflations which appear in what can be described as her 'hyperbolic' style and her use of dangerous moral equivalences" (Mullaney 119). These varied critical positions on Roy's dissident voice create a space for multiplicity that would perhaps emerge on a closer analysis of her non-fiction.

If we establish a thread of connection between Chomsky and Roy, while Chomsky's writings focus on political theories like Israel or American

insurgence into Vietnam in the form of academic resistance, Roy's works signify contemporary political issues in India that find an expression of resistance in her impassioned literary prose.

Belonging to the current generation of Indian writers in English, Roy is known for her field activism (with Narmada *bachao*[12] movement), strategic writings on India's nuclear policy and her outspoken political statements (the latest being her resistance against Anna Hazare's anti-corruption movement[13]). The four characteristics of a dissident, i.e., aspects of strong personal belief, expressiveness, rebellion and clear personal opinions on issues can be noticeably observed in Roy's writings.

In the subsequent segments, we focus on two essays from the compilation of Roy's essays in *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* (2001); "The End of Imagination," and "The Greater Common Good." We make an attempt through a close reading of these essays to descry dissent present deep within Roy's pursuit of individual, cultural and political freedom.

"The End of Imagination": Dissenting Voice in the Nuke

Written in the context of the test explosions of nuclear devices conducted by India in the Pokhran test range in May 1998, in "The End of Imagination" Roy begins by arguing that the masses don't have an understanding of the nature of nuclear bombs. They are not aware of the scope and the scale of their consequences. Subsequently, she attempts to deconstruct the "Theory of Deterrence," which she says is an "old thesis that has been resurrected" (7) for the support of nuclear weapons. Roy makes a case against the idea that nuclear weapons will prevent wars and promote peace. Of the two major flaws that she discusses in the essay, the first is that deterrence relies heavily on the assumption that what deters the perpetrator will deter the enemy:

> Flaw Number One is that it 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 – the 'We'll take you with us' school – is that an outlandish thought? (8; emphasis in the original)

Dismissing the idea that deterrence will work by instilling fear, the second flaw that is pointed out is that fear is based upon knowledge – of nuclear weapons and their effects – which the majority of people in India lack: "But fear is premised on knowledge…. Deterrence will not and cannot work given the

[12] The reference is to "Save Narmada movement."

[13] See Roy naming the movement as "aggressive nationalism" of Anna Hazare in "I'd Rather Not be Anna."

levels of ignorance and illiteracy that hang over our two countries like dense, impenetrable veils" (9).

It is to be noted that Roy's contention is predominantly ideological and her argument in the essay also proceeds to enter the realm of cultural politics. She cites "The Three Official Reasons" which motivated the Indian government to carry the nuclear tests as: 1) China, 2) Pakistan and 3) Exposing Western Hypocrisy. Roy attacks these individually, arguing against each one of them. Her criticism is particularly incisive against "Exposing Western Hypocrisy," which Roy keeps debating through rhetorical questions. Her dissent springs from a deep economic and cultural concern.

> We have less money, less food and smaller bombs. However, we have, or had, all kinds of other wealth. Delightful, unquantifiable. What we've done with it is the opposite of what we think we've done. We've pawned it all. We've traded it in. For what? In order to enter into a contract with the very people we claim to despise. (25)

There are broadly two areas where Roy's opposition is expressed: one is on the understanding of a "national" (Indian in this context) identity, and secondly, how that connects to the want of a nuclear bomb. The necessity of an enemy "other" in order to define a "self" or an identity for a national selfhood is expressed in Roy's anti-nuke arguments:

> We need enemies. We have so little sense of ourselves as a nation, we cast about for targets to define ourselves against. To prevent the state from crumbling, we need a national cause…. This is the road that has led us to the bomb. This search for selfhood. (27)

Roy's dissent is entrenched in humour, exaggeration and satire, as she flays the very idea of forming an Indian identity – arguing that in a country where the "majority of India's citizens (to this day) will not be able to identify its boundaries on a map" (28), it is the politicians who have exploited this notion of having a "single, lucid, cohesive" (29) identity. Thus, Roy's ideological argument is inter-woven in the diatribe against political parties, which follows to lambast a government which, she says, "has kicked us over" (31). Roy questions why India should treat the "most diabolic creation of Western science and call it our own" (33). She says that on the one hand we protest against Western art, music, culture, cinema and literature and, on the other, we live through a "nuclearization" which comes from the "West." The conclusion is lucid, as she states that "there's no such thing as an Authentic India or a Real Indian" (37). As in the beginning, a recurring theme of "The End of Imagination" is the concern which also manifests itself at the end, for the millions of people who are unaware of nuclear weapons or nuclear war, who she says "have the right to

make an informed decision" (39-40). Articulate and urging, the essay closes with an instigation, an awakening call to the readers that:

> The nuclear bomb is the most anti-democratic, anti-national, anti-human, outright evil thing that man has ever made. If you are religious, then remember that this bomb is Man's challenge to God. It's worded quite simply: *We have the power to destroy everything that You have created.*
>
> If you're not religious, then look at it this way. This world of ours is four thousand, six hundred million years old. It could end in an afternoon. (40-41; emphasis in the original)

The literary elements of sarcasm, irony and denouncement of nuclear policies constitute the expression of Roy's dissent. "The End of Imagination" reflects Roy's agony of an impending nuclear war as a major trope, which surfaces in its dissenting voice through the maximum use of theatricality. For instance, at one juncture in the essay she compares nuke with Viagra:

> Reading the papers, it was often hard to tell when people were referring to Viagra (which was competing for second place on the front pages) and when they were talking about the bomb – 'We have superior strength and potency' (This was our Minister for Defence after Pakistan completed its tests.). 'These are not just nuclear tests, they are nationalism tests,' we were repeatedly told. (17-18)

It is not easy to ignore what might be called the author paranoia, which results from the fear of nuclear war: "The sky, the land, the air, the wind will turn against us…. Rivers will turn to poison, the air will become fire…. Burned and blind and bald and ill, carrying the cancerous carcasses of our children, where shall we go?"(5-6). Roy's use of this theatrical element of exaggeration in language seems to be a deliberate means of portraying her terror of the threat that nuclear weapons pose to the world.

Dissent becomes intrinsic to the essay, as her use of rhetoric becomes yet another channel of dissent: "Explosion of self-esteem," 'Road to Resurgence," "A Moment of Pride," these were headlines in the papers in the days following the nuclear tests. "We have proved that we are not eunuchs anymore," said Mr Thackeray…" (17).

Expressing her dismay at how even "people whose instincts one thought one could trust, writers, painters, journalists" (17) were welcoming or consenting to the nuclear tests, Roy is deeply conscious that her style of writing might come across as pessimistic: "Ignore it, it's just a novelist's naiveté, they'll tell you, Doomsday Prophet hyperbole. It'll never come to that. There will *be* no war. Nuclear weapons are about peace, not war" (7).

Roy's dissent in "The End of Imagination" evinces one of the quintessential characteristics of a dissident: that of writing in the awareness of the strong conviction that the disagreement must be voiced in spite of a lurking rejection. "I'm prepared to grovel," Roy says, "To humiliate myself abjectly, because, in the circumstances, silence would be indefensible" (4). Nevertheless, Roy's dissent transcends the mere urge of expressing it. It is this urge that leads her writing to be infused with dissent which is immensely creative in its articulation. Her dissent is not actuated from the urge to express it; rather a conscious awareness forces her to cull her capacities as a writer, resulting in a recurring impassioned plea and the rhetorical play in her essays. As Ghosh points out in "Tallying Bodies," Roy's devotion to "ordinariness" in her non-fiction "hones the global to personal scale" and accounts for the passionate creative surplus of her prose.

> The only good thing about nuclear war is that it is the single most egalitarian idea that man has ever had. On the day of reckoning, you will not be asked to present your credentials. The devastation will be indiscriminate. The bomb isn't in your backyard. It's in your body. And mine. (12)

"The End of Imagination" is, as the reader will agree, undoubtedly one of the most impassioned essays of Roy. We move on to analyse in the next section "The Greater Common Good," written as a critique on the dams of India.

"Monuments of Modern Civilization": Dissenting With "The Greater Common Good"

"The Greater Common Good" is an essay wherein Roy scrutinises the controversial scenario of dams, particularly the Narmada Valley Project. Roy sets the ground for discussion about the public perception regarding the fight against Sardar Sarovar Dam. Through this essay, one can observe Roy's desire for a space in the larger canvas of national discourses in order to put into perspective the story about dams.

Roy begins by stating how big dams, "decommissioned" (57) by the First World, are now being exported to the third world in the name of "Development Aid" (58). The dissenting voice sets in with a sudden sense of shock that not even a single post-project evaluation of any of the 3,600 dams in India has been done by the Indian Government. The urge to unearth the case of Indian dams, and expound it to the reader impelled Roy to undertake this study. The theatricality that one observes in "The End of Imagination" continues as a writing mode in "The Greater Common Good." One can see the articulation of this disbelief marked with hyperbole. For instance, after citing

resources and estimating the number of people displaced by the dam, she writes:

> That's what it works out to. Thirty-three *million* people. Displaced by big dams *alone* in the last fifty years. What about those that have been displaced by the thousands of other Development Projects…. You have to murmur it for fear of being accused of hyperbole. You have to whisper it to yourself, because it really does sound unbelievable. It *can't be*, I've been telling myself. I must have got the zeroes muddled. *It can't be true*. I barely have the courage to say it aloud. To run the risk of sounding like a 1960s hippie dropping acid ("It's the System, man!"), or a paranoid schizophrenic with a persecution complex. But it *is* the System, man. What else can it be? (61; emphasis in the original)

Once again, this disbelief stems from a deep and recurrent concern for those ignored by the state.

Roy's dissent is deep-seated in her criticism of the "benevolent mask of" democracy and state institutions, and against the inability to "address and attack" this process. In an Interview with Amitava Kumar for *Guernica*, Roy states that her critique is not only driven by compassion or by sympathy for the poor. It is purely "structural in nature." Dissent against the state also leads her to question the tolerance of the public.

Roy's criticism of the state is informed by this dreadful sense of the un-informed and the misinformed people, of "believe[ing] what we are told" (65). Once again, one can attribute to her this scepticism as an aspect that compels her to constantly query – perhaps an inevitable task wherein questions are a *sine qua non* for taking a position. Attempting to "puncture the myth about the inefficient, bumbling, corrupt, but ultimately genial, essentially democratic, Indian State" (69), she suggests a deep sense of disappointment. The "careful observer," as she notes, will understand the ever-changing numerical figure representing the amount of water in the Narmada river. Roy's stance seems to suggest her eco-consciousness:

> It will alter the ecology of the entire river basin of one of India's biggest rivers. For better or for worse, it will affect the lives of twenty-five million people who live in the valley. Yet, even before the Ministry of Environment cleared the project, the World Bank offered to finance the lynch-pin of the project – the Sardar Sarovar Dam (whose reservoir displaces people in Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, but whose benefits go to Gujarat)…. The 450-million-dollar loan for the Sardar Sarovar Projects was sanctioned and in place in 1985. Ministry of Environment clearance for the project came only in 1987! Talk about enthusiasm. It fairly borders on evangelism. Can anybody care so much?
>
> Why were they so keen? (75-76)

It is crucial to note here that the contention is not purely ideological. She does not problematise the Narmada Valley Project based on an anti-dam philosophy, but is outspoken in the exposition of the conflicts that she finds inherent in the project: "And if there's no surfeit, you're left with an empty dam. And this defeats the purpose of irrigation, which is to *store* the monsoon water. It's like the conundrum of trying to ford a river with a fox, a chicken and a bag of grain" (83).

The exposition revolves in her dissenting opinions that structure around feasibility issues, economics, ecological consequences and the failure to achieve the objectives purported by the dam projects. Intertwined in the essay are arguments and statistics that fittingly substantiate the former. Roy's study and scope is vast, as she quotes sources and writes with poetic and determined conviction.

The comparison with Indian State committees disallowing entry for project reviews is made to highlight the state's abject disregard towards understanding ecology and environment. Moreover, the emphasis is on the ludicrousness of the "rehabilitation charade" (100).

> In several resettlement sites, people have been dumped in rows of corrugated tin sheds which are furnaces in summer and fridges in winter. Some of them are located in dry river beds which, during the monsoon, turn into fast-flowing drifts. I've been to some of these 'sites.' I've seen film footage of others: shivering children perched like birds on the edges of *charpais*, while swirling waters enter their tin homes. (104)

The essay's unique aspect is its commentary about the culture shock that blights the displaced people. She studies resettlement as a painful process of formation of a new identity.

> For the people who've been resettled, everything has to be re-learned. Every little thing, every big thing: from shitting and pissing (where d'you do it when there's no jungle to hide you?) to buying a bus ticket, to learning a new language, to understanding money. And worst of all, learning to be supplicants. Learning to take orders. Learning to have Masters. Learning to answer only when you're addressed. (106-107)

In her essays, Roy attempts to understand the pattern of multiple issues that form the core of one major political "moment" and these patterns seem to form the layers of her dissenting voice. For example, she talks about the submergence of temples of the tribal groups in "Greater Common Good" – such that the government "thinks nothing of submerging a valley that has yielded fossils, microliths… and is the only valley in India, according to

archaeologists, that has an uninterrupted record of human occupation from the Old Stone Age"(114-15). She uses facts and figures and economics to highlight related issues of poverty, migration and conservation. It is indeed a "calibrated calculus" of moral, political and social data (Ghosh, "Tallying Bodies" 145). It is the explanation of the human-nature interdependence, and the illustration through examples of the disruption of this interdependence, otherwise ignored by the state, which is highlighted in her essay:

> The government simply says that it will alleviate the loss of Hilsa fisheries by stocking the reservoir with hatchery-bred fish. (Who'll control the reservoir? Who'll grant the commercial fishing to its favourite paying customers?) The only hitch is that so far, scientists have not managed to breed Hilsa artificially. The rearing of Hilsa depends on getting spawn from wild adults, which will, in all likelihood be eliminated by the dam. Dams have either eliminated or endangered one-fifth of the world's freshwater fish.
>
> So! Quiz question – where will the 40,000 fisher folk go? (119)

Roy's attempt to plumb the embroiled situation of the "Big Dams" is marked with the consistent impetus to explore questions on issues that otherwise go unquestioned. With the recurrent pattern of quoting statistics from surveys and reports, making inferences and arguing, she takes a position that is arrived at through this clear reasoning. Her dissent goes beyond a rhetorical practice seeming as almost an automated stream of responses based on her individual research. It is perhaps owing to this compelling urge to dissent that Roy digresses into lofty expressions about the Narmada Valley.

> The war for the Narmada Valley is not just some exotic tribal war or a remote rural war or even an exclusively Indian war. It's a war for the rivers and the mountains and the forests of the world. All sorts of warriors from all over the world, anyone who wishes to enlist, will be honoured and welcomed. Every kind of warrior will be needed. (93)

The Dark Angels: Listening to the Voice of Dissent

In our close-reading of the two essays of Roy, the intention has been to contextualise the theory of dissent and the characteristics of political and philosophical dissidence in the South Asian literary context. While scholars like Chomsky have already been studied as "dissenting voices" in the Western political contexts, we need to understand symptomatic voices in the South Asian contexts. We have attempted to open a "reading" of Roy's texts along the principles of dissent. Our aim has been to understand the theory of dissent as a literary principle in its own right.

We must note that dissidents are not always welcome and the voice of dissent whether in Chomsky or in Roy have also elicited counter-critiques. In a cross-fire between Ramachandra Guha and Roy in the columns of *The Hindu* (November 1, 1996 and December 17, 2000), Guha names Roy's activism and her dissenting voice as "celebrity endorsement of social movements" and brands Roy's activism as "self-indulgent" and "hyperbolic."[14] He calls her "unoriginal" and "careless" – her work being a brand of impassioned literary writing rather than documented presentation of facts. Roy in her interview with N. Ram, "A Writer's Place in Society," counter-attacks Guha stating that he is guilty of "flabby conclusions drawn from sloppy readings" and that "he owes me a public apology" ("Interview" 191). Without taking a particular side in these cross-fires, we could still figure out the necessity of such debates in order to highlight issues of global relevance.

However, it should be also observed that Roy's dissent is not solely based on passion. "The Greater Common Good" is replete with discussions about reports and statistics – with each of the sources being presented as End-notes to the essay.[15] The critical reader will realise that Roy is conscious and rather respectable towards those who disagree – as she anticipates the readers' reactions while reading through her essay:[16]

> Allow me to shake your faith. Put your hand in mine and let me lead you through the maze. Do this, because it's important that you understand. If you find reason to disagree, by all means take the other side. But please don't ignore it, don't look away.
>
> It isn't an easy tale to tell. It's full of numbers and explanations. Numbers used to make my eyes glaze over. Not anymore. Not since I began to follow the direction in which they point.
>
> Trust me. There's a story here.... (65-66)

The primary scope of Roy's investigation is the Indian context. However, she also moves out of the Indian space to understand the connections and the

[14] See Ramchandra Guha's opinion "Arun Shourie of the Left" in *The Hindu*, 26 November 2000.

[15] It might be helpful to note that Roy is chary of being counter-charged. As a result, Roy makes an effort to quote figures not only from NBA (Narmada Bachao Andolan), but other sources. Moreover, she emphasizes this effort:

> Time and again, it's the same story – the Andhra Pradesh Irrigation II scheme claimed it would displace 63,000 people. When completed, it displaced 150,000 people. The Gujarat Medium Irrigation II scheme displaced 140,000 people instead of 63,600. The revised estimate of the number of people to be displaced by the Upper Krishna irrigation project in Karnataka is 240,000 against its initial claims of displacing only 20,000. These are World Bank figures. Not the NBA's. Imagine what this does to our conservative estimate of thirty-three million.

[16] We have also shown the presence of this anticipation of counter-arguments, a kind of "Prolepsis" in our discussion of "The End of Imagination."

interaction of the State with world entities like the World Bank and to find parallels, so as to bolster her argument.[17] One can argue that Roy's major contention is the structural inequality – the powerlessness of millions and the powerfulness of few. The reader is exposed to the sad canvas that Roy paints upon; there is the state on one hand, and the "non-citizen" Indian on the other. The state is failing in its pursuit of the objectives it was set up for. Yet, it is successful in its ways of providing privileges to a few, and brutal in its perpetual disregard for the downtrodden. The "Indian," or precisely, the affected, common Indian is either unaware, handicapped by ignorance and illiteracy,[18] or is suppressed to the point of helplessness, tired of fighting. This juxtaposition is to focus the stark inequity, the unbalanced distribution of not only wealth but power which forms the source of the undertone of pathos so palpable in Roy's writing.

> Power is fortified not just by what it destroys, but also by what it creates. Not just by what it takes, but also by what it gives. And Powerlessness reaffirmed not just by the helplessness of those who have lost, but also by the gratitude of those who have (or *think* they have) gained. (136; emphasis in the original)

To understand the force of Roy's dissent, it is crucial to note that the effect of her personal interaction with those affected gets infused into her writing. Although this in no way clouds her reasoning or prejudices her, her *emotional constitution* is embedded in the chunks of her impassioned prose. It is only upon noting the confrontation of this *emotional constitution* with the stark reality of inequality that one can begin to understand why the rhetorician in this writer must come to the fore. The characteristic imbuement of prose with rhetoric appears to inevitably result from direct contact and the shock and agony of knowing the suffering of the "resettled."

Much of Roy's non-fiction appears to be influenced by personal experience; a journalistic tendency to visit "affected" places and interact with "affected" people. These influences are clear from the introductory passage of the "Greater Common Good." Also, Roy's controversial essay "Walking with

[17] For instance, Roy tells us about how dams have affected the land in Pakistan, or the help from Japan. "The Japanese arm of Friends of the Earth mounted a campaign in Japan that succeeded in getting the Government of Japan to withdraw its 27-billion-yen loan to finance the Sardar Sarovar Projects. (The contract for the turbines still holds.) Once the Japanese withdrew, international pressure from various Environmental Activist groups who supported the struggle began to mount on the World Bank."

[18] We refer here to Roy's concern that the masses have little or no understanding of nuclear bombs. Also, in "The Greater Common Good," as Roy traces the origin of Narmada Valley Project and the fighting between states regarding the water, she mentions with typographical emphasis: "*The people whose lives were going to be devastated were neither informed nor consulted nor heard*" (113; emphasis in the original).

the Comrades," on the Maoist insurgency essentially narrates her journey through Dantewada, Chattisgarh and Maoist regions around. Thus, the shock, pain, disgust and ire felt at this "other India" results in the "shrill rhetoric" that Roy is sometimes criticised for. Dissent is wrapped in the rhetorical compositions, for Roy's objective is now extended to the task of transmitting to the reader the impact of the experiential deductions, or as Ghosh puts it, "her agenda is to make this cold arithmetic palpable, to bring the taste of a dead body to our mouths" (Ghosh 141).

> Bhaiji Bhai, Bhaiji Bhai, when will you get angry?
>
> When will you stop waiting? When will you say 'That's enough!' and reach for your weapons, whatever they may be? When will you show us the whole of your resonant, terrifying, invincible strength?
>
> When will you break the faith? *Will* you break the faith? Or will you let it break you? (134)

We have seen in "The Greater Common Good" that eco-consciousness forms the basis of the second significant dimension to Roy's disagreement. If nuclear bombs pose the threat of sudden destruction, dams are insidiously disrupting the ecological balance.

Roy delineates the various failures and contradictions, trying hard to ground the reader's perception in reality. It also leads her towards that knowledge which causes shock, disbelief and agony. This constant inquiring and questioning is the route to the literary stance that Roy takes – that of dissent – the reproving of those she deems responsible for some consequence because of their place in power structures.

Thus, this journey through Arundhati Roy's dissenting voice bestows upon the reader an understanding of the existence of the "dark side," and its implications for those who are convinced otherwise. Going back to our initial theorising of the nature of "dissent," what makes Roy's presence as one of the "dark angels of dissenting voices" palpable is her sensational yet realistic presentation of the "other" side of the "official" accounts and records. Roy's dissent is a literary dissent marred by hyperbole, yet she should be acknowledged as one of those literary voices which are fearless in their thought and expression. Her dissent is that of a loner who attempts to project the "collective" gig-lamp voices of the masses for whom she writes. The hostility that her craft faces sometimes appears to be deliberately courted as is the nature of the dissident writer. She is a loner who stands to defend her work by her own "alert" literary and critical sharpness.

To conclude, we could summarise Roy's identity as a dissident writer with her own words. In the interview with N. Ram, Roy presents a summary of her

position as the lone writer who has turned to create her own image in the space of the public imagination through her personal activism.

> Well, every writer – good, bad, successful or not – who's sitting at a desk looking at a blank piece of paper, is lonely. It's probably the loneliest work in the world. (Ram 197)

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