

## Beyond the Rhetoric of Belonging: Arundhati Roy and the Dalit Perspective

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### Abstract

This essay proposes a reflection on Arundhati Roy's recent involvement in Dalit politics. In particular, it addresses the polemic letter to Roy presented by a group of Dalit intellectuals after the publication of a new edition of Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste* (originally written in 1936), which includes an introductory essay by Roy. The critiques against Roy interrogate the right to take part in public life without being able to claim "entitlement" or "authenticity." By discussing the debates over rights to speak and to "represent," this essay offers a reflection on the meaning of a politics of emancipation that falls neither into identity politics nor into appropriating the voice of the marginalised. Instead, this essay proposes a reappraisal of the value of an "ethics of identification" through which outsiders can assume the standpoint of the oppressed and be able to tell experiences that they have not lived through. Beyond the rhetoric of belonging, the exchange between Roy and her Dalit critics suggests an ethics of identification that emphasises the continuing relevance of expressing social consciousness and communication across sites of struggle for social justice.

### Keywords

Rhetoric of belonging, Dalit politics, Arundhati Roy, politics of representation, ethics of identification, entitlement

The publication of a new annotated edition of Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste* in 2014, with a long introductory essay by Arundhati Roy, "The Doctor and the Saint," sparked a lot of controversy in India and in Europe. An important part of this controversy was published in the website Round Table India in March 2014. A group of Dalit intellectuals presented an open letter to Arundhati Roy, in which they question her ability and her entitlement to "introduce" *Annihilation of Caste*. Neither a Dalit nor a Hindu, how is Roy supposed to "introduce" Ambedkar? Why did the publisher choose her to present this important book to

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contemporary readers? How can Roy's intervention avoid resulting in the appropriation and silencing of Dalit experience? The debates started after the online publication of some excerpts from Roy's introduction and the cancellation of the book launch in Hyderabad after threats from alleged Dalit activists, who later denied any involvement in preventing the launch. However, Dalit intellectuals reacted with anger and resentment to Roy's introduction. The website Round Table India offers an overview of the stakes of this debate. Dalit intellectuals have remarked that Roy is not entitled to speak for them and hence unentitled to introduce Ambedkar. The following reflections will explore the meaning and implications of designating Roy as someone who lacks the *title* to speak and to write. I will propose some thoughts on the value and significance of taking part in public life without the right entitlements, authority and without being able to claim authenticity. This discussion coincides with a growing interest in Dalit literature and politics beyond India, and the related issues of representation that emerge from this process. In their introduction to a volume on Dalit literature, Joshil K. Abraham and Judith Misrahi-Barak identify a potential predicament in writing on Dalit literature:

The problematic of *inside* and *outside* has been contentious: the issue of writing *on* or *from* a Dalit perspective reminds of other debates that have taken place in the context of other literatures – such as postcolonial or African American literatures. It raises questions of entitlement, authorship, legitimacy and voice, appropriation and reclaiming. Whose voice is speaking? Whose pen is writing? Who has a right to speak about the Dalits and their literature? (Abraham and Misrahi-Barak 4)

Within current, animated discourses on the politics of representation of Dalit voices, Gopal Guru makes the point that “the representation of Dalits by non-Dalits becomes problematic... since it sustains itself on the basis of a permanent exclusion of Dalits from the intellectual domain.” However, Gopal Guru suggests that there also is a need for an “ethic informed by public accountability.” Returning Dalits the authority to claim their own representation is not sufficient for “a transformative Dalit politics,” as it prevents “the possibility of Dalits acquiring the intellectual leadership to speak in the universal language of emancipation” (Guru). The ability to move beyond the politics of representation towards a public ethic of emancipation is crucial. In postcolonial criticism, the work of Neil Lazarus has superbly demonstrated the need to challenge identity politics in favour of a materialist emphasis on universal liberation. In a pivotal passage of *The Postcolonial Unconscious*, Lazarus remarks that universalism is no “woolly abstraction” but rather an “active searching out and public presentation of connections, contrasts and alternatives” that articulate political demands (199). This is also what philosopher Alain Badiou observes in his important critique of cultural politics, by suggesting that the political is “less the demand of a social

fraction or community to be integrated into the existing order than something which touches on a transformation of that order as a whole” (109). The key question of whether a non-Dalit can speak *on* or *from* a Dalit perspective captures the entire problem of an ethics of universal social justice and political transformation in a postcolonial world.

In what follows, I would like to account for the fact that I am writing about this debate from a location in Europe and that I am speaking from *outside* Dalit culture. The question addressed to Arundhati Roy – are you entitled to speak at all? – is the first question that I intend to pose, by way of reflection, to my own writing. An Italian scholar working on questions of public intellectualism in postcolonial contexts, my positioning is defined by what critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in *Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, calls a “double bind,” an insoluble contradiction. On the one hand, my European location would prevent me from claiming any sort of (critical) “authority” on the work of Arundhati Roy or the terms of this debate. There is, indeed, a distance between myself and the living context of this controversy and the constituencies, social movements, representatives that are involved. There is no way to collapse this distance. On the other hand, however, after following this debate and reading the new edition of *Annihilation of Caste* – including Roy’s essay – I feel that I cannot *not* learn from and reflect on this debate. My position is marked by an impossibility and by an imperative: I cannot and must write at the same time. Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben pointed this out in an influential work on ethics by writing that to speak, “to bear witness, is thus to enter into a vertiginous movement in which something sinks to the bottom... and something subjectified speaks without truly having anything to say of its own (‘I tell things ... that I did not actually experience’)” (120). This double bind of witnessing is also presented in a pivotal essay on the historical experience of the Holocaust by Dori Laub, where he writes that “the imperative to tell the story... is inhabited by the impossibility of telling” (78-79). However, in Agamben’s reflection on witnessing, the ethical question does not concern something that one can recognise as one’s own past and own memory: it is the double bind of having to tell – to testify to – things that I have *not* experienced, that are *not* my own. Agamben defines the double bind of the witness as “the impossibility of speaking in his own speech” (120) and clarifies that this is the inescapable ethical demand bearing upon the witness. Without the distance or gap, there is no space for ethics, because subjects remain trapped in identity and immediacy. It is only those who are able to grasp and inhabit this gap – at the core of any situation of trauma, struggle, oppression and resistance – that can have a glimpse of the problem of testifying and engage with it. Even if you are part of the situation and fully entitled to speak, in other words, you become a witness if you are able to step outside the immediate and perceive a sort of inability to speak, assuming the outside as your own.

The key problem in this context is how to turn the impossibility into a possibility, and hence define a meaning of the ethical that does not escape, but rather builds on the double bind of the testimony: speaking about something that one does not own, that is not part of one's own experience, that is marked by an unbridgeable distance. The controversy about Arundhati Roy allowed me to learn and to reflect on this key ethical problem that is at the heart of my research. For this reason, the subject of this essay does not concern whether Roy is or isn't the right person to introduce *Annihilation of Caste*. This essay attempts to connect the intervention of a South Asian woman writer to problems and issues that are also vital in the EU today, especially in relation to the importance of intellectual "affiliation" to social movements and collective struggle for social justice. In the first part of this essay, I will provide a summary of the key elements of the debate that emerged after the publication of "The Doctor and the Saint" and Arundhati Roy's response. In the second part, my reflections will relate this controversy to broader questions about public engagement, the role of creative writers in postcolonial politics, and the difference between a rhetoric of belonging based upon the claim to authenticity and an ethics of identification that builds on feelings of solidarity and empathy with the oppressed. The aim of this essay, in other words, will not be to *intervene* in the debate or take sides, but to *reflect* on the interest of this debate for readers that are involved in other sites of struggle and protest, yet could strongly benefit and *learn* from the work of South Asian women writers committed to social justice. The conclusion of my essay will elaborate on the possibility of placing South Asian women writers in a frame of international solidarity that is not merely reiterating the dominance of the jargon of identity politics and labelling South Asian writers as native informants.

### **Who has the Right to Speak? On Commitment and Affiliation**

In their open letter published in Round Table India, the intellectuals of Dalit Camera pose 12 questions to Arundhati Roy. They are not mere questions – that is, speech acts intended to elicit a genuine answer, which the questioner does not yet know – but rather exhortations and, partly, rhetorical questions, to which the questioner already knows the answer. Thus, in some of their initial statements, Dalit intellectuals ask:

Your essay does not serve the purpose of an introduction to Ambedkar's classic text *Annihilation of Caste*. You did not track the publication or circulation history or even the historic role of *Annihilation of Caste* in Indian society. In what ways you feel that you are competent to introduce this text?... Do you share the view that Dalit activists and scholars are better qualified to introduce *Annihilation of Caste* both in terms of their engagement with Ambedkar and their life experience? (Dalit Camera)

This cluster of questions highlights three important points: first, it claims that Roy's essay does not "serve the purpose" of introducing Ambedkar's text; second, it questions Roy's "competence" in introducing it and, third, it suggests that Dalit scholars are "better qualified" to do it – in terms of their engagement and life experience. It is worth noting that these statements adopt a language of competence, skill, ability and qualification. The questions do not concern so much *what* Arundhati Roy has written or not written about Ambedkar. The lacunae in her writing point to the very fact that she is speaking about his legacy today. This is not a discussion about contents or propositions but rather about the position of the writer and her supposed status and identity. In her response, Roy deals with the first, crucial, issue that is put forward by Dalit Camera. She writes:

First of all, on the subject of representation.... Our debate of course is not about the political representation of Dalits in general, but whether a non-Dalit can/should have written this introduction at all. It is not a new debate, but one that the Civil rights movement in the USA, Feminists all over the world, the anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa, and the Queer Movement deal with all the time.... If it is your case that a Dalit writing about Ambedkar will have a different reading from a non-Dalit, a privileged caste Hindu, then I agree with you -- though I would still exercise caution against essentialism of this sort. But to say that every Dalit reading is automatically "authentic" and every non-Dalit reading is "misleading" is not something that I agree with. The point is, whatever my privileges are – or yours for that matter – are we fighting against Brahminism or strengthening it? ("Response to Dalit Camera")

In her answer, Arundhati Roy does not claim that Dalit intellectuals are wrong and that, in contrast with what they propose, she has indeed every right to speak and to introduce. Roy does not reclaim any kind of entitlement or belonging. On the contrary, she agrees with her critics and even concedes their point. In a way, she is stressing that they are right: a Dalit would have a *different* reading. The problem is, however, whether this difference is so "different" to prevent Roy from understanding things from a Dalit point of view. The fact that she emphasises does not concern the "lived experience of being Dalit," of course, of which a Dalit can give a more accurate representation. The question concerns whether a non-Dalit can write the introduction to Ambedkar, and whether any Dalit reading would be "automatically" correct and authentic. This has to do with the formulation of identity politics and the right to speak, but also with an understanding of the specific claims that are being made by writers. Roy does not seem to deny that Dalit can provide a more accurate description of their situation, but this does not prevent her from writing about Ambedkar. The contention in this first round of debate between Dalit Camera and Roy is one that cannot be

easily solved or dismissed: on the one hand, Dalit Camera have a point when they interrogate why Roy has the role of introducing Ambedkar. On the other hand, Roy's answer underlines that non-Dalit "can/should" have the possibility to write about Ambedkar and even "introduce" *Annihilation of Caste*. Roy's position-taking is worth examining, because it captures the ethical dilemma of feeling the imperative and simultaneously not having the legitimacy to write about a topic.

Roy feels the imperative, Dalit Camera emphasise the impossibility: these two positions do not need to be seen as mutually exclusive. What can be learned from Arundhati Roy's response is the ability to assume or inhabit critically this paradoxical, problematic situation. She rightly points out that this is a key debate within the Civil rights movement in USA and in other contexts. Many affinities have been proposed between the Dalit movement and black struggle in North America, starting from the tradition of connections and exchanges between Dalit and Afro-Americans in what Vijay Prashad calls the "Afro-Asian traffic," and the naming of Dalit resistance as "Dalit Panthers" after the "Black Panthers" (Gokhale-Turner 77). In other words, the problem of who is entitled to speak is already a transversal question: representing means achieving the ability to create a contact zone between different contexts of struggle, being involved in an exchange with the *outside* of a community. Also, Roy refers to feminism, a movement in which the issue of representation and being legitimised to speak for someone else has been central for decades. Thus, in her important response to Chandra Talpade Mohanty's 1988 influential essay, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," Sara Suleri makes important reflections that resonate with Roy's letter. Suleri writes:

The claim to authenticity – only a black can speak for a black; only a postcolonial subcontinental feminist can adequately represent the lived experience of that culture – points to the great difficulty posited by the 'authenticity' of female racial voices in the great game that claims to be the first narrative of what the ethnically constructed woman is deemed to want. ("Woman Skin Deep" 760)

Suleri's reflections speak to the debate over Roy's introduction of Ambedkar because they reveal a similar problem within the feminist tradition. Western feminists have appropriated the voice of Third-World women and hence kept them in an "object status," always spoken for, and silenced by, the subjectivity of the representative. Yet, Suleri's critique of the jargon of authenticity shows that by rightly opposing western appropriations of their standpoint, Third-World feminists risk becoming a new "first narrative" of what women want: identity politics is another form of exclusion, appropriation and silencing. The important struggle against restoring the voice of the excluded should avoid merely reiterating the same act of exclusion and appropriation of claiming that only some are entitled to "represent" by virtue of their innate authenticity.

In keeping with Suleri's critique of Mohanty's dichotomy, Arundhati Roy overcomes a simple "literal" ethic whereby either you are "authentic" and hence entitled to speak for your own experience, or you are inauthentic, hence you are someone who appropriates and exploits others' suffering and histories. Roy's response goes beyond this opposition to suggest a third possibility: you can also write about Dalit experience, being aware of your own position, yet not renouncing the responsibility of witnessing Dalit suffering and expressing your solidarity in the struggle for social justice. In the context of Dalit feminism, it has been argued that a simple claim to difference is not enough to achieve a truly transformative politics. In an important essay on the tradition of Dalit women's struggle, Sharmila Rege suggests the possibility of creating a "Dalit feminist standpoint." She observes:

The Dalit feminist standpoint which emerges from the practices and struggles of Dalit woman, we recognise, may originate in the works of Dalit feminist intellectuals but it cannot flourish if isolated from the experiences and ideas of other groups who must educate themselves about the histories, the preferred social relations and utopias and the struggles of the marginalised. A transformation from 'their cause' to 'our cause' is possible for subjectivities can be transformed. By this we do not argue that non-Dalit feminists can 'speak as' or 'for the' Dalit women but they can 'reinvent themselves as Dalit feminists.' (Rege 45)

Sharmila Rege provides a convincing critique of identity politics and remarks the difficult task of inhabiting a Dalit feminist "standpoint" through which different sites of struggle for emancipation could communicate. Her observations also stress the crux of the debate: is it possible at all that "their cause" can become "our cause?" Can an outsider rightly express solidarity, empathy, even identification with the oppressed without silencing their voice? Is such a thing as an ethics of identification possible, beyond the politics of representation? This set of questions leads to another important cluster of issues posed by Dalit Camera in Round Table India, which further problematises Roy's introduction. The Dalit Camera collective write that Roy has "done injustice to Ambedkar's text" and ask whether Roy feels that she is "an authority (in terms of your research or involvement in Dalit politics) on Ambedkar" and therefore "competent to assess Ambedkar's position on capitalism, Adivasis, Brahmanism, caste etc" (Dalit Camera). They continue:

Dalits feel cheated that you and Navayana GOT all the media attention... but the title *Annihilation of Caste* by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar is just used. Why did you use Ambedkar in this manner? Do you feel now that it is unethical? (Dalit Camera)

These additional questions add the dimension of an “unethical” authorship into the debate. Alongside interrogating Roy’s position and identity, Dalit Camera want to know more about the real intentions of Arundhati Roy and the effects produced by her involvement. Besides interrogating Roy’s entitlement, Dalit Camera also question her status and responsibility as a writer: Roy is said to have “used” Ambedkar as a pretext to write an essay on Gandhi instead of doing justice to Ambedkar. Dalit intellectuals argue that Roy not only appropriates Dalit experience, but also assumes the position of an author/authority on Dalit history in order to shift attention away from the real issue of Dalit emancipation. They argue that the intellectual captures media attention and obscures the reality of the oppressed. Arundhati Roy continues her answer by addressing this issue in detail. She responds:

I am not a Dalit, I am not a Hindu, and I am not an authority on Ambedkar, though I have, unlike many people, including many Dalits, taken the trouble to read him. I do not write from a position of authority. I write from the position of a writer who engages with things that she feels are important to her, and to the society that she lives in. I am sure there are several scholars, both Dalit and non-Dalit who are better placed to write an introduction to *Annihilation of Caste* far more knowledgeable than mine. They should go ahead and do so. (“Response to Dalit Camera”)

Interestingly, Roy renounces the position of “authority” and rephrases her position as a “writer who engages with things that she feels are important to her.” This remark could seem very simple to understand and straightforward, but it is actually very subtle. Roy is moving the meaning of being authentic from a question of identity to the authenticity of her moral imperative, making clear her intention and motivation to write. Her position is defined by what is “important to her”: instead of writing because there is something that she can claim to possess or represent, it is the fact of being a writer that allows her to articulate and express what is important to her. A radical reversal has taken place. Dalit resistance prompts Arundhati Roy to express her solidarity and “affiliation” to the cause of anti-caste struggle. To adopt Edward Said’s famous distinction between human bonds made out of biological relations of *filiation* and critical forms of *affiliation* across different social groups (Said 16), it could be said that Roy does not allow her affiliative relationship to become another form of filiation. Solidarity created independently is not rooted into a rhetoric of belonging. Arundhati Roy does not take part in Dalit politics as a Dalit native informant, but she participates in it nonetheless. Dalit Camera seem to be able to see things only from the other point of view: your filiation is what prompts you to political engagement. For Roy, it is political engagement that prompts forms and occasions of social affiliation. This is not mere reversal of identity politics but the envisioning of another politics, and another ethics, altogether. Dalit



Camera's reproach that Roy is "using" Ambedkar and hence being "unethical" does not fully engage with the possible meaning of an ethics of identification that depends on intention and motivation instead of claims of authority.

### **On Adopting the Experience of Living Others**

The problematic relationship between affiliation and commitment raised by the debate between Roy and Dalit Camera is highly relevant to current discourses on postcolonial ethics and politics. A thoughtful investigation of the possibility of being able to represent experiences and histories that one has not lived through can be found in Marianne Hirsch's theory of post-memory: the memory of what one has not experienced. The concept of post-memory is based on the possibility of transmitting traces of traumatic events by generations of descendants of the victims. Will future generations be able to remember things that they have not suffered? How will they articulate their entitlement, right to speak and "authority," even if there are no direct survivors left? Hirsch asks:

If we thus *adopt* the traumatic experiences of others as experiences that we might ourselves have lived through, if we inscribe them into our own life story, can we do so without imitating or unduly appropriating them? (Hirsch 114)

Hirsch's ethical dilemma points to the ability to *adopt* the trauma and suffering of others as our own. This is a central question, one that could be raised in relation to the exchange between Arundhati Roy and Dalit Camera: can anyone *adopt* the traumatic experience of others? Would the historical experience of Dalit oppression and resistance be communicable by a non-Dalit? Hirsch's words emphasise a vital issue, yet the controversy over Roy's essay on Ambedkar extends this interrogative to reach a wider temporal and spatial dimension, beyond Europe and beyond the reference to "memory." Indeed, what Hirsch develops in the context of memory, especially as regards memories of the Holocaust, has wider implications and needs to be expanded in order to include the problem of being able to adopt the experiences of others who are living and continuing to endure oppression and to manifest resistance in the present. It is not just past suffering that has to be accounted for: the tradition of the oppressed requires attention to the present as well. The question concerns whether there is someone who is able to assume as her own what remains unsaid of the exploitation, violence and marginalisation that are being carried out on oppressed groups.

Indeed, this is not so much a question of being able to *remember* but rather to *identify with* something that one does not experience oneself. It is more about witnessing rather than just recollecting. As Agamben notes, witnessing implies being able to "place oneself in one's own language in the position of those who

have lost it” (161). The point is not only to be able to reminisce about past things that are at risk of disappearing, but to mobilise this process in order to act upon the present. The ethical quest needs to turn into a politics. Furthermore, rather than restricting the acts of postmemory to the realm of filiation – *our* family, *our* group or lineage – the ethical double bind of witnessing triggers what critic Kaja Silverman calls a process of “heteropathic identification”: an act that introduces in *my* memories and my story “not only what resides outside the given-to-be-seen, but what my *moi* excludes – what must be denied in order for myself to exist as such” (185). Heteropathic identification would, in other words, “introduce the ‘not me’ into my memory reserve” (185). This would correspond to Alison Landsberg’s notion of a form of identification “structured not on sameness and similarity, but on distance and difference” (225). The point is to develop the ability to identify with the other, in order to introduce an element of otherness, critique and distance within ourselves. In the case of Arundhati Roy’s debate with Dalit Camera, the witness is the one who is able to place oneself in the position of those who are oppressed, *even if they have not lost their language, because they are living and they are able to speak*. Assuming a Dalit standpoint is an epistemological act that does not aim at appropriating Dalit experience, but at becoming able to listen to Dalit perspectives by identifying with them; it is the precondition to challenging caste-blindness. Instead of being based on the absence of the other, the ethical dimension that can be learned from Arundhati Roy’s commitment concerns the ability to witness what is living and present. It also guarantees exposure to questions and responses by Dalit intellectuals. From this point of view, the online exchange over Ambedkar’s introduction is highly precious and instructive for thinking ethical and political engagement in the twenty-first century. The last extract from Dalit Camera’s questions that I report in this essay reveals the intention behind this interrogation of Roy’s role and entitlements. Dalit Camera write:

The intention has always been to raise criticism of your role in the preparation of the edited book and also the contents of your introduction. Many Dalit activists including myself are not pleased with your introduction and the planning of the event and publicity around your book and your star status.... The intention is not to stall the event or to ban your views but to make our point that you did not do justice to *Annihilation of Caste*. (Roy, “An Open Letter”)

This passage reveals that the Dalit constituencies that Roy is supposed to be representing or even “patronising” are indeed able to express their voice and be heard. The value of Roy’s intervention also rests on her ability to cause a response from Dalit intellectuals. Her answer, indeed, ends with the exhortation that Dalit and non-Dalit scholars write another introduction to *Annihilation of Caste*. Whereas Dalit critics attack Roy for her compliance with capitalism – her star

status and publicity for the event – their use of the internet as an arena to voice their views suggests that both Roy and Dalit intellectuals are contributing to the making of a common public sphere that goes beyond the Subcontinent. The circulation of the debate beyond Dalit activists reveals potentialities for constructing political solidarities and the role of intellectuals in taking part in social movements. Whereas Roy has been described by critics as a “messiah” and as a “star,” her interventions often take the form of declarations, statements of solidarity, or reports that do not claim to be “representing” Dalit voices but rather to indicate the possibility to adopt their position as our own. Roy’s ethics of identification suggests the attempt to create affiliations among people in struggle.

In contrast with what François Laruelle calls the “dominant” or media-friendly intellectual, Roy’s interventions need to be read as “declarations” of a committed writer: declarations and position-takings rather than a manifesto, and her position as a writer should not be confused with the claims of a prophet or a messiah. The concept of writing a “declaration” rather than a manifesto has been expressed recently by two important political thinkers, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, who also had to confront the issue of writing about things that they do not “represent.” In their case, the movement was not the Dalit movement but the social movements of protest initiated in 2011 in North Africa, which are still continuing today in many locations of the globe. Hardt and Negri published a short reflection in the online journal *Jacobin*, where they present their thoughts in the form of a declaration on current events rather than any sort of manifesto. They write:

Manifestos work like the ancient prophets, who by the power of their vision create their own people. Today’s social movements have reversed the order, making manifestos and prophets obsolete. Agents of change have already descended into the streets and occupied city squares, not only threatening and toppling rulers but also conjuring visions of a new world. (Hardt and Negri, “Take Up the Baton”)

People are already fighting and forging new political alliances in streets and city squares. They do not need any sort of prophet or super-star to indicate the way. Fully aware of this, Arundhati Roy never claimed any leadership or authority to “represent” Dalit, Adivasi or any other oppressed community. Her work problematises any conjuring of homogeneous entities such as “the people” and always points to the differential claims, exigencies and forms of oppression through which people in struggle define themselves. Reading Arundhati Roy also solicits reflections on the possibility of identifying with the oppressed, beyond the logic of stardom and publicity. Intellectuals such as Roy have today assumed the role of articulating and critically expressing movements that already have a voice and an existence. Roy embodies the “traditions of rational thought in our intellectual heritage” that, according to Romila Thapar, have marked the social

function of public thinkers in the Subcontinent since Antiquity. Her role as intellectual corresponds to the reflections proposed by Hardt and Negri in their declaration, where they remark that the “task is not to codify new social relations in a fixed order, but instead to create a constituent process that organizes those relations and makes them lasting while also fostering future innovations and remaining open to the desires of the multitude” (“Take Up the Baton”). Intellectuals do not have the function to tell people what they should do, or who they are. But, precisely for this reason, intellectuals are still needed, if they are able to assume the role of organising existing relations, making them last and keeping them open to future changes. The intellectual should inhabit the position of a custodian or a keeper of living realities that are already being shaped, instead of aiming to fix them into a frame. Roy’s reply to her critics points to this task of making the struggle last, forging new connections and keeping anti-caste struggle open to new inclusions and solidarities.

### **Conclusion: Beyond the Rhetoric of Belonging**

In an important essay on the differences between slavery and untouchability, Ambedkar wrote that “if a man is deprived of his liberty indirectly he has no consciousness of his enslavement. Untouchability is an indirect form of slavery.... It is enslavement without making the Untouchables conscious of their enslavement.... It is real though it is indirect. It is enduring because it is unconscious” (Ambedkar, *Writings and Speeches* 15). In societies that reproduce such forms of “indirect” and “unconscious” enslavement and oppression, an ethic of identification can help articulate a public consciousness of inequality and social injustice. This does not imply that engaged writers have a vanguard, leadership or spokesperson “entitling” role that would enable them to speak for oppressed groups. Those able to identify with the oppressed do not speak the “truth” to power, nor do they represent “the people.” But they can help formulate a public consciousness of oppression.

The ethics of identification means the ability to assume the standpoint of the other in order to contribute to a political transformation of society as a whole. For this reason, Dalit intellectuals can rightly claim that they do not “need” Arundhati Roy to express their experience and fight for their rights. She is presented as engaged writer caught between her non-Dalit position and her Dalit position-taking. Without claiming any Dalit identity, however, Roy expresses solidarity and forms of identification with Dalit resistance that put commitment before belonging, affiliation before filiation, critique before identity. The interest of Roy’s intervention has to do, precisely, with her ability to formulate public awareness of experiences that are not her own and that she cannot claim to “represent.” Instead of writing about the past, the intellectual assumes the function of the keeper of the revolt of the present; she is someone who registers what is happening and adds one more voice to the voices that are already

speaking. Roy does not defy the problematic, even paradoxical act of feeling the imperative and being reminded of the impossibility of narrating “authentic” Dalit historical experiences. But she is definitely aware of her position as engaged *writer*. In an interview with Siddhartha Deb published in the New York Times the same year of the publication of the new edition of *Annihilation of Caste*, Roy writes, in relation to her role as creative writer and author of a novel:

I’m not a person who likes to use fiction as a means. I think it’s an irreducible thing, fiction. It’s itself. It’s not a movie, it’s not a political tract, it’s not a slogan. The ways in which I have thought politically, the proteins of that have to be broken down and forgotten about, until it comes out as the sweat on your skin. (Deb)

If this statement applies to fiction, how do her literary abilities feed into her nonfictional writing? Could her introduction to *Annihilation of Caste* be read differently, starting from this declaration? Instead of providing a slogan or a manifesto, Arundhati Roy’s engagement is a process in which political thought “comes out” as “sweat on your skin”: it is the expression of a condition that is not innate or inherent to her but rather acquired with continuous effort, critical reflection and engagement. The model of politics indicated through Roy’s response to her critics enables other intellectuals to go beyond their own position, or rather *take* new positions in the attempt to construct new forms of social affiliation, alongside people who are already struggling in the streets and city squares. In the context of defining their intellectual position in their “declaration,” Hardt and Negri refer to the example of *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison’s novel on racial discrimination in the USA, and write:

Ralph Ellison’s invisible man, after an arduous journey through a racist society, developed the ability to communicate with others in struggle. ‘Who knows,’ Ellison’s narrator concludes, ‘but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?’ Today, too, those in struggle communicate on the lower frequencies, but, unlike in Ellison’s time, no one speaks for them. The lower frequencies are open airwaves for all. And some messages can be heard only by those in struggle. (“Take Up the Baton”)

On the lower frequencies, the exchange between Roy and her critics can indicate a new model for political engagement, whereby writing is always embedded in a relationship to living, speaking, vocal constituencies that do not need anyone to speak *for* them. Yet, on the lower frequencies, these kinds of exchanges can contribute to formulating a public consciousness of oppression: beyond the rhetoric of belonging, the ethics of identification involves the ability to assume the position of the oppressed, without appropriating it, but in order to foster a truly political transformation of society.

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