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Voices of the Voiceless: Social Transition and Resistance in the Nonfiction of Arundhati Roy

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ABSTRACT:

Arundhati Roy's nonfiction foregrounds the experiences of oppressed groups that are often silenced, offering a more inclusive and diversified view of social injustices through the politics of resistance. Her writings explore multiple forms of opposition to repressive regimes and help us understand the causes, strategies, and outcomes of social movements. By sharply critiquing economic and political power structures, Roy exposes how powerful interests shape policy, sustain inequality, and obstruct social progress. Studying her politics of resistance is vital for fostering informed citizenship, accountable leadership, and cross-cultural solidarity, as well as for examining global movements that challenge dominant paradigms.

INTRODUCTION:

Postmodern Indian English literature of recent decades shows dramatic shifts in how writers address cultural, economic, and political questions. Critics and authors have challenged long-held assumptions, taboos, and stereotypical practices, turning creative writing into a site of resistance. Major themes include the struggle of the socially oppressed, disempowerment, diasporic liminality, and ecocritical readings of nature. Many writers—such as Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, V.S. Naipaul, and Bharati Mukherjee—have condemned pervasive social injustices and raised strong counter-voices. A distinct feature of this period is the progressive voice of women authors who, while still expected to fulfill traditional roles, assert themselves as individuals fighting for dignity and equality in a patriarchal and class-stratified society. Their subjugation has become central to gynocritical and feminist discourse, and many women writers adopt a rebellious storytelling mode that gives voice to the voiceless.

Arundhati Roy's 1997 novel *The God of Small Things* emerges from this context as an extraordinary literary phenomenon in both concept and execution. The Booker-winning debut reworks the clichéd "old duchess and gamekeeper" plot into a

radical narrative about forbidden love between Velutha, a Dalit Paravan, and Ammu, a Syrian Christian woman, exposing the violence of caste, class, and patriarchal norms. The novel signals a revolution in narrative tone and structure, centring on conflict between two social classes—the “Laltain” and the “Mombatti”—and exposing patriarchy, corrupt politics, lack of empathy for the poor, and the oppressive institution of marriage. Roy’s work stands out not only for its political content but also for its innovative use of language and form. She deliberately fashions “weird English” as a counter to the hegemony of standard English, employing architectural experimentation in sentence structure, playful neologisms, humour, fragmentation, and Malayalam translations. By bending, wrenching, and rejecting conventional linguistic norms, she constructs her own canon of signifier and signified, thus challenging the dominant linguistic order and enriching the conventional narrative mode through semantic and semasiological experimentation.

Roy has also shown sustained concern for environmental, social, political, economic, and cultural issues in India and globally. After *The God of Small Things*, she did not publish another novel for nearly twenty years; instead, she turned to essays and nonfiction, later returning with *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017). Her deep awareness of the exploitation of the powerless and her sense of responsibility as a writer led her to bridge art and activism, using writing to expose injustice and to propose strategies for resistance. She questions the binary that labels novelists as “writers” and essayists as “activists,” arguing that, in her case, there is no ideological separation between the literary and the political. For Roy, writing in any form becomes a way to comprehend an unjust world and to narrate the suffering of subaltern communities living amid deracination, malnutrition, unemployment, and even extermination. In essays such as “The Ladies Have Feelings, So...” she stresses that artists, writers, and filmmakers are uniquely positioned to translate incomprehensible global realities—economic data, policy, and corporate discourse—into human stories.

READING RECONSTRUCTION IN POLITICAL WRITINGS

Debates on the role of art and artists in society date back at least to Plato, who wished to expel poets from his ideal state, and Aristotle, who defended poetry in *Poetics*. Later critics such as Longinus, Horace, Sidney, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Eliot continued to theorize literature’s social and aesthetic functions. With colonization, these debates became more explicitly political as imperial powers sought to use literature as a tool of hegemonic expansion.

Modernism further politicized the question of art’s function, particularly after the horrors of the First World War. Works like T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* captured

spiritual and social decay, while writers such as Joyce, Pound, Kafka, and others addressed socio-political and cultural crises through formal experimentation. Post-World War II, artists increasingly recognized the power of art to raise awareness and effect cultural change, as the Holocaust and nuclear bombings rendered purely aesthetic conceptions of art inadequate. Formerly colonized nations in Asia and Africa began constructing their own literary canons that reflected local histories and contemporary struggles.

Texts such as Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind*, and works like *The Empire Writes Back* and *Culture and Imperialism* demonstrate the growing engagement of writers with global sociopolitical and cultural issues. In the present globalized "village," dominated by multinational corporations, virtual realities, and relentless mobility, art and artists are deeply implicated in debates on identity, power, and justice. Indian writing in English has also evolved as writers like Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan insist on appropriating English in distinctly Indian ways to address national and socio-political issues.

ARUNDHATI ROY AS A RECONSTRUCTIONIST VOICE

The *God of Small Things* brought Roy international fame and was hailed as one of the most daring and imaginative works of Indian fiction in recent years. Its bold thematic concerns and experimental narrative techniques reveal a rebellious urge to break conventions. While focusing on the tragedy of a single family, the novel powerfully reflects the postcolonial condition, depicting desolation, hopelessness, and frustration. It critiques Christian hypocrisy, Hindu casteism, patriarchal domination, capitalism, colonialism, and nationalism, and rejects all totalizing systems that seek to confine human experience within rigid ideological frames. The novel also stands out for its unique language use.

Roy adopts and reshapes English within the Indian context, making it flexible enough to convey local culture while intentionally destabilizing its "standard" form. Her strategies include single-word sentences, shifting word classes, unusual capitalization, distorted sounds, italics, the removal of spaces between words, and playful manipulations of spelling and punctuation. These experiments open up new possibilities for Indian writing in English and mark Roy's fiction as a site of linguistic reconstruction. Crucially, Roy remains faithful to her political objectives even after achieving massive literary success. She soon recognized how global publishing markets were commodifying her work and exoticizing "brown women's bodies," turning the novel into a product of capitalist-patriarchal enterprise. In response, she

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decided to distance herself from mainstream fiction and redirect her celebrity towards foregrounding social and political wrongs.

Roy's rise to literary prominence coincided with India's embrace of globalization, trade liberalization (through GATT/WTO), nuclear ambitions, the rise of Hindutva politics, and outbreaks of communal violence such as the 1992 Babri Masjid demolition and the 2002 Gujarat pogrom. Globally, the events of 9/11 and the subsequent "War on Terror" reshaped power relations and normalized continual conflict. Roy critically interrogates these developments, exposing how grand development projects and neoliberal agendas rarely produce equitable progress but instead deepen inequality and erode democratic values. She argues that corporate globalization and neoliberalism enrich a small elite while undermining pluralistic democracy and subjecting the majority to new forms of violence and fundamentalism. For Roy, silence in the face of such injustices would be morally indefensible; she declares her willingness to risk shame and vulnerability in order to speak out, insisting that the stakes involve the future of entire generations.

Consequently, Roy emerges as an author-activist whose primary goal is to reveal the exploitative practices through which power structures control and dispossess marginalized communities. Her work persistently exposes the imperialist and capitalist character of modern states, neoliberal policies, and U.S. hegemony, all of which have had devastating consequences for non-Western populations. She weaves together multiple critical frameworks—Marxism, postcolonial theory, environmental feminism, and subaltern studies—into a complex discourse of resistance organised around gender, class, caste, and the postcolonial condition. This position, however, has provoked debate. Critics like Graham Huggan question on whose behalf Roy speaks—Adivasi "oustees," Narmada movement activists, international "eco-warriors," or the Indian public at large—and warn that her stance risks overshadowing the voices of those she seeks to represent.

CONCLUSION

Since *The God of Small Things*, Roy has been one of India's most prominent and uncompromising critics of contemporary capitalism and state power. Her writing and activism express deep concern for the oppressed and for those marginalized by dominant development narratives. Commentators praise her capacity to locate the "pulse of the nation" that politicians, media, and the urban middle class often ignore or deny. She repeatedly warns that capitalism's relentless drive for expansion is pushing the world from creation toward destruction, a concern echoed by recent United Nations environmental assessments that link current economic models to ecological collapse. Roy's reconstructionist voice thus lies in her refusal to separate

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literature from politics, her innovative recasting of language, and her sustained challenge to structures of domination in both national and global contexts.

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