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## Literary Witness And Internal Colonialism: Arundhati Roy's Political Essays On Maoism, The Indian State And The Ethics Of Resistance

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**Abstract:** Arundhati Roy's political nonfiction—spanning *Walking with the Comrades* (2011), *Broken Republic* (2011), *Capitalism: A Ghost Story* (2014), and *Azadi* (2020)—constitutes one of the most contested and intellectually serious bodies of political writing produced in postcolonial South Asia. This paper argues that Roy practises literary witnessing: an ethically committed form of reportage that amplifies subaltern voices without absorbing them into an authorial monologue. Reading her essays against postcolonial theory (Fanon, Spivak), critical sociology (Gramsci, Agamben), subaltern historiography (Guha), and allied scholarship (Scott, Baviskar, Nilsen, Nussbaum), the analysis examines how Roy exposes development as internal colonialism, how Operation Green Hunt and Salwa Judum constitute a state of exception, and how mainstream media manufactures consent for militarised governance. The paper attends equally to the gendered dimensions of the conflict and to the ethical tensions latent in Roy's own position as a writer-witness, arguing throughout that her hybrid genre—between reportage, memoir, and political essay—is not incidental to her argument but constitutive of it.

**Keywords:** *Arundhati Roy; internal colonialism; Maoist insurgency; literary witnessing; state of exception; Adivasi; counter-hegemony; postcolonial nonfiction*

### ***I. Introduction: The Unsettled Essay***

Arundhati Roy published *The God of Small Things* in 1997, won the Booker Prize, and then set the novel aside—apparently for good—to write about dams, displacement, nuclear tests, and guerrilla fighters in India's forests. Many readers interpreted that pivot as an abandonment of literature for politics. The framing was never accurate. Roy's essays are literary objects shaped by the same attentiveness to rhythm, image, and narrative consequence that marks her fiction. The difference is that in the essays the suffering is not invented—it belongs to people who are still alive, still fighting, or already dead—and that changes what writing must do and what it can honestly claim.

Her engagement with the Maoist insurgency in central India and with the Indian state's violent response to it spans roughly two decades. The essays have provoked serious legal and public controversy; Roy has been accused of romanticising political violence and of acting in bad faith toward the nation. Her supporters counter that she did what very few mainstream journalists were willing to do: go into the forests, listen to the people who live there, and report back without euphemism. That disagreement over what she was doing in those forests, and why, is diagnostic. It reveals the political conditions under which the writing is produced and the stakes attached to how it is received.

This paper does not adjudicate that controversy. Instead, it asks what Roy's essays do—how they work as ethical and literary texts, what theoretical resources they draw upon, and what their formal choices reveal about the possibilities and limits of political writing. The argument is that Roy practises literary witnessing: a mode of writing that refuses the fiction of journalistic objectivity, makes the act of listening itself an ethical and political gesture, and insists on the particularity of lived experience against the abstractions of

policy language. Reading Roy alongside Spivak on subaltern representation, Gramsci on hegemony, Agamben on juridical exception, and Fanon on colonial violence clarifies both the depth of her analytical project and the places where her account leaves significant work undone.

## ***II. Literary Witnessing: Method, Ethics, and the Politics of Listening***

There is a direct way to describe what Roy does in *Walking with the Comrades*: she spent several weeks travelling through the Dandakaranya forest with Maoist guerrillas, recorded what she saw and heard, and wrote about it. That description is accurate but incomplete. What distinguishes Roy's method from conventional reportage is not merely physical proximity to her subjects—though that proximity is rare enough—but the ethical orientation she brings to the act of narration. Roy does not arrive in the forest with a thesis that the guerrillas will confirm or refute. She arrives to listen, and listening as she practises it involves a deliberate suspension of the narrator's interpretive authority—a willingness to hold what she hears without immediately converting it into an argument or a verdict.

When a tribal leader explains that villagers joined the Maoists not out of ideology but out of exhaustion with broken promises, Roy records that explanation without correcting it against Maoist doctrine. When a young woman fighter describes finding a sense of dignity in the guerrilla camp unavailable in her village, Roy notes the paradox without dissolving it into either celebration or condemnation. The ambiguity is the point. Roy writes in *Walking with the Comrades* that the war in the forests "did not begin with guns. It began when the law arrived as a weapon" [15, p. 38]. That sentence compresses a complex causal claim that juridical dispossession preceded armed conflict—into an image sharp enough to persist long after the essay ends.

The theoretical vocabulary most useful for understanding this practice comes, in part, from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak argues that the subaltern—those occupying the lowest positions in colonial and postcolonial hierarchies—cannot simply speak into the dominant public sphere; the structural conditions of their marginalisation prevent their speech from being received on its own terms. Any attempt to represent the subaltern risks reinscribing the hierarchies it means to contest, as the intellectual's voice inevitably mediates and thus partially displaces the voice it claims to relay [18, pp. 271–73]. Roy is clearly aware of this danger. Her repeated acknowledgments of her positional gap—her insistence on walking with people rather than speaking for them—reflect a Spivakian caution about representation. Whether that caution fully resolves the structural problem Spivak identifies is a question worth keeping open throughout any careful reading of her work.

Martha Nussbaum's arguments about the moral work of narrative offer another angle of entry. For Nussbaum, literary imagination cultivates a capacity for empathy—the ability to grasp a situation from another's perspective and to hold that perspective with enough precision to understand its moral claim—that philosophical abstraction tends to foreclose [11, pp. 5–6]. Roy's essays deploy this capacity deliberately. They insist on the concrete: the face of an old man who watched his village burned, the name of a river that once provided fish and now runs clouded during military operations, the specific texture of exhaustion on the faces of guerrillas who have not seen their families in years. These details are not decorative. They perform the moral work Nussbaum describes: they make it harder to think about the conflict in purely strategic or administrative terms.

Edward Said, writing in *Representations of the Intellectual*, further argued that the genuine intellectual must speak truth to power and resist the temptations of affiliation—the pull toward institutions that offer security in exchange for loyalty [16, pp. 75–76]. Roy's career after *The God of Small Things* follows precisely this arc, at considerable personal and legal cost. She has refused the literary establishment's invitation to remain a novelist and the nationalist establishment's expectation of loyalty. Those refusals are part of the context within which her writing is produced and must be understood.

## ***III. Development as Dispossession: The Grammar of Internal Colonialism***

The phrase "internal colonialism" carries a specific intellectual history that Roy does not always make explicit. Pablo González Casanova introduced the term in 1965 to describe the relationship between metropolitan centres and peripheral regions within a single nation-state, where the latter is systematically exploited in ways that mirror colonial extraction [6, pp. 27–28]. Michael Hechter later extended the concept to describe ethnic stratification within advanced industrial societies, focusing on what he called the cultural division of labour and the structured inequality it produces between dominant and peripheral groups [9, pp. 9–12]. In the Indian context, the framework maps with considerable precision onto the relationship between the postcolonial developmental state and the country's mineral-rich tribal belt, a region whose resources have been extracted for urban-industrial growth while its inhabitants have remained among the most impoverished in the country.

Roy makes this argument at length across *Capitalism: A Ghost Story* and the essays in *Broken Republic*. Her method is not statistical but cumulative: particular cases placed in sequence revealing the same structural logic operating in different locations and different decades. The dam that submerges ten villages to provide electricity for a distant city. The conservation policy that locks tribal communities out of forests they have managed for generations, under the language of heritage and biodiversity. The mine whose dust fills the lungs of workers who will never see the pensions promised on paper. Each case discloses the same pattern: resources flow outward and upward; costs are borne by those who can least absorb them. As Roy writes in *Walking with the Comrades*, "there is a direct line that runs from the boardrooms of corporations to the burnt villages of central India" [15, p. 14].

Ranajit Guha's *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* illuminates what is at stake in this structural pattern. Guha traces how colonial law transformed peasant communities' relationship to the land—how the juridical category of private property, imposed through survey and settlement operations, dissolved customary rights that had no place in the new legal order [8, pp. 4–9]. Development law in independent India—forest Acts, land acquisition statutes, environmental clearance regimes—creates legal categories that, like their colonial predecessors, tend to recognise the claims of capital over the claims of custom and practice. The Adivasi family that has farmed a hillside for three generations holds no registered title; the mining company that acquires that hillside holds a government-issued lease. The law's silence on customary tenure is not a technical oversight. It is, as Roy insists, the law functioning as a weapon of dispossession.

Amita Baviskar's ethnographic study of displacement in the Narmada Valley provides crucial empirical grounding for claims of this kind. Her fieldwork among Bhilala Adivasis in Madhya Pradesh documents how dam-related displacement does not simply destroy material livelihoods but dissolves the symbolic and cosmological orders through which communities constitute themselves—the river is not merely a resource but a social and spiritual entity whose integrity is inseparable from the community's own [3, pp. 27–34]. Roy gestures toward similar dimensions of loss in her essays, though her polemical urgency can crowd out a fuller reckoning with what dispossession actually means to those who undergo it. Reading her alongside Baviskar's ethnography produces a more complete picture than either text alone provides.

#### ***IV. The State of Exception: Operation Green Hunt, Salwa Judum, and Bare Life***

Giorgio Agamben's account of the state of exception—the juridical suspension of normal law in the name of security retains genuine analytical force when applied to India's Red Corridor. Agamben's argument, developed across *Homo Sacer* and *State of Exception*, is that modern sovereignty is constituted not by the normal rule of law but by the capacity to decide when law does not apply. Those subjected to the exception—reduced to what Agamben calls "bare life"—have no political standing to contest their own reduction [1, pp. 1–8]. Roy's account of the Red Corridor describes this configuration with a specificity that purely theoretical accounts cannot match.

Operation Green Hunt, the military campaign launched in 2009, brought tens of thousands of paramilitary troops into villages with a mandate to eliminate Maoist guerrillas. The practical consequence was that entire communities were placed under a de facto state of exception: farmers with no affiliation to the Maoists found themselves subject to night searches, arbitrary detention, and a pervasive presumption of guilt. One villager told Roy: "In these forests, being poor, tribal, and in the wrong place is reason enough to be considered guilty" [15, p. 2]. The village becomes a combat zone; its inhabitants become potential combatants; the juridical distinction between civilian and suspect dissolves, and with it the legal framework within which rights are ordinarily asserted.

Salwa Judum—the state-supported militia active in Chhattisgarh from approximately 2005 to 2011—represents an even more explicit form of juridical exceptionalism. Young men, many of them Adivasi, were recruited and armed as Special Police Officers; tens of thousands of families were forcibly relocated into government-run camps; villages that declined to cooperate were burned. A displaced villager is quoted in *Walking with the Comrades*: "Entire villages have been erased. People who refused to join Salwa Judum were branded Maoists. People who joined it became targets. There was no safe place left to stand." The Supreme Court of India's judgment in *Nandini Sundar & Ors v. State of Chhattisgarh* (2011) eventually declared Salwa Judum unconstitutional, vindicating much of Roy's earlier critique, but militarisation in the region did not end.

Roy's observation in *Azadi* that the Indian state has an unlimited capacity to rebrand its exceptional measures as ordinary legal operations deserves more sustained attention than it typically receives [12, pp. 43–45]. It is equally important to acknowledge that Roy's critique of state violence does not translate into uncritical endorsement of Maoist violence. Her argument echoes Fanon's claim in *The Wretched of the Earth* that colonial violence generates counter-violence as something closer to structural inevitability than

ideological first choice [5, pp. 51–53]. James Scott's *Weapons of the Weak* adds a complementary perspective: subordinated communities practise everyday forms of resistance—foot-dragging, dissimulation, feigned ignorance that fall short of organised collective action but cumulatively limit the reach of domination [17, p. xvi], and Roy's portrayal of pre-insurgent village life resonates with Scott's framework in ways that complicate the binary of passive victim and armed rebel that official narratives tend to impose.

### ***V. Hegemony, Media, and the Politics of Silence***

Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony—the process through which dominant classes maintain power not primarily through coercion but through the manufacturing of consent is central to Roy's analysis of how the Maoist conflict is represented in India's mainstream media. Gramsci argued that intellectual and cultural institutions naturalise existing power relations, making the perspective of the ruling bloc appear as common sense rather than as a particular interest [7, pp. 12–14]. Roy's journalism constitutes a sustained attempt to contest that common sense.

Her critique of television news is particularly pointed. In *Walking with the Comrades*, Roy notes that "in television studios and newspaper columns, the war has already been won many times over. Only the dead in the forests seem unaware of it" [15, p. 42]. Prime-time coverage of operations in the Red Corridor tends to foreground security force casualties and Maoist atrocities while rendering Adivasi civilian casualties statistically negligible. The result is a public narrative in which state violence appears as legitimate defensive force and Maoist violence appears as irrational terrorism—a binary that makes the systemic conditions producing the conflict very difficult to see or contest within any level of public discourse.

Roy's discussion of the criminalisation of dissent in *Azadi* extends this analysis into the contemporary period. The label "urban Maoist"—applied to academics, lawyers, and activists accused of providing intellectual support to the insurgency—collapses the distinction between dissent and sedition. Once that distinction collapses, the space available for critical speech contracts sharply. Veena Das's work on violence and ordinary life provides a useful analytical supplement: Das argues that political violence does not merely damage bodies but attacks the social fabric within which ordinary speech and action are possible [4, pp. 10–12]. The criminalisation of dissent Roy describes operates as a form of this second-order violence—producing a climate of self-censorship more durable and pervasive than direct repression. Alf Gunvald Nilsen's ethnographic work on Adivasi movements provides a comparative frame that shows how the labelling of subaltern political activity as extremism is a recurring feature of the developmental state's relationship with peripheral communities, not a response peculiar to the Maoist insurgency [10, pp. 12–19].

### ***VI. Gender at the Margins: Women, Conflict, and the Subaltern Body***

Roy's attention to women's experience in the Maoist conflict is among the most politically significant and theoretically underdeveloped dimensions of her essays. Mainstream accounts of the insurgency tend to render women as background figures: victims of displacement, casualties of crossfire, or, occasionally, female combatants whose presence is noted as a curiosity and then set aside. Roy contests this rendering persistently. Women appear in her texts as agents—fighters, organisers, messengers, cultural workers as well as victims, and the boundary between those roles is frequently unstable. That instability is itself analytically significant.

Her account of female fighters in the guerrilla camps is striking. *Walking with the Comrades* records a young woman describing how life in the movement offered a form of dignity unavailable in her village, where patriarchal custom and economic precarity had worked in conjunction to limit her possibilities [15, p. 102]. Roy presents this without romanticising it: the dignity available in the guerrilla camp is constrained and costly purchased through separation from family, acceptance of danger, and subordination to movement discipline. That it represents an improvement over village life is itself an indictment of the structural conditions that make a forest insurgency more hospitable to female agency than the domestic sphere.

Nandini Sundar's *The Burning Forest*—an independently authored sociological and legal account of the Bastar conflict, distinct from Roy's own essays—provides empirical detail on sexual violence in conflict zones that Roy gestures toward but does not fully develop. Sundar documents with legal precision the use of rape as a tool of counterinsurgency: village women assaulted during search operations, testimonies suppressed, perpetrators shielded. The distinction between Roy's literary reportage and Sundar's ethnographic and legal analysis is a reminder that different genres do different kinds of intellectual work. The most honest critical approach is to read them as complementary rather than interchangeable.

Spivak's question—can the subaltern speak?—returns with particular urgency in relation to gendered testimony. The women Roy interviews speak; Roy records their speech; Roy's essays then circulate that speech through a global literary marketplace, and at each relay something is transformed. Roy is more reflexive about this layering in relation to women's testimony than in relation to men's, and that reflexivity—though it cannot dissolve the structural problem Spivak identifies—prevents her account from collapsing into the patronising rescue narratives that have historically dominated metropolitan feminist engagements with Third World conflict.

### ***VII. The Writer as Witness: Responsibility, Risk, and the Ethics of Speaking***

One of the most candid passages in Roy's nonfiction appears in *Walking with the Comrades*: "To write about people whose lives are under siege is not an act of charity; it is a responsibility that demands honesty, humility, and risk." That sentence rejects the philanthropic model of political writing—in which the privileged author bestows attention on suffering from a secure distance and replaces it with a model of obligation. Writing about people under siege is something Roy owes, not something she benevolently offers, and that framing changes the ethical stakes of every formal and rhetorical choice she makes.

Said, writing in *Representations of the Intellectual*, argued that the genuine intellectual must speak truth to power and resist the temptations of affiliation—the pull toward institutions that offer security in exchange for loyalty and silence [16, pp. 75–76]. Roy's career after *The God of Small Things* follows precisely this arc, at considerable personal and legal cost. She has refused the literary establishment's invitation to remain a novelist and the nationalist establishment's expectation of loyalty, accepting instead the exposure that comes with persistent public criticism of state power. Those refusals are part of the material conditions within which her writing is produced and must be read.

There is, however, a tension in Roy's practice that Said's heroic model does not quite capture. Said's intellectual speaks from individual conviction; Roy's witnessing depends on other people's testimony. She is not generating analysis from first principles—she is relaying what Adivasi villagers, guerrilla fighters, and forest workers told her over a period of weeks. The value of her writing therefore depends on the integrity of her listening, not merely on the courage of her speech. Ranajit Guha's methodological insistence on recovering the subaltern's own voice from beneath layers of elite documentation points toward what Roy is attempting [8, pp. 11–16], though Guha works with historical archives where Roy works with living testimony and archives do not contradict their editors.

Roy addresses her own limitations in the reflexive passages scattered through her essays: noting when she cannot verify a claim, when she relies on a single source, when her own presence may have shaped what people said. As she writes in *Azadi*: "To speak, to write, is not always to change the world. But to remain silent is to side with the forces that are destroying it" [12, p. 3].

### ***VIII. Conclusion: What Witnessing Demands***

Arundhati Roy's political essays refuse the consolations that political writing often offers: the consolation of resolved argument, of moral clarity, of a conclusion that lets the reader close the book and move comfortably on. *Walking with the Comrades* ends not with a solution but with Roy walking out of the forest, carrying the weight of what she has witnessed, uncertain what her writing will accomplish. That uncertainty is not failure of nerve. It is an honest acknowledgment that the conditions she has documented—land alienation, militarisation, the criminalisation of dissent are not amenable to literary resolution.

What her essays can do—and what they do at their best is make it harder to think about structural violence in bad faith. They insert specific lives into abstract political debates. They insist on the causal connections between corporate capital and village clearance, between development rhetoric and displacement violence, between security discourse and the reduction of entire communities to bare life. Reading Roy alongside Fanon, Gramsci, Agamben, Spivak, Guha, Baviskar, and Nilsen clarifies the depth of her project: not merely journalistic documentation but a sustained attempt to understand how structural violence reproduces itself through law, culture, and capital.

Her essays are at their strongest when the theoretical architecture is least visible—when the argument emerges from the accumulated weight of particular stories rather than from explicit programmatic assertion. They are at their most honest when they acknowledge that the writer's own position is part of what is at stake in any act of political witnessing. The question Roy asks in *Azadi* "Can a nation call itself free when its poorest citizens live under permanent fear?" is genuine, not rhetorical. Roy's essays cannot answer it. But they sustain that question with a discipline and a human specificity that official discourse cannot accommodate. They make it impossible, for any reader who engages them honestly, to continue thinking

about Indian democracy, development, and dissent in comfortable terms. In the present political moment, that refusal of comfortable abstraction may be the most important thing writing can do.

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