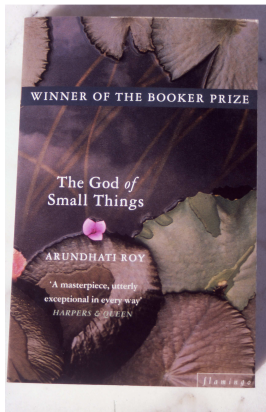


An Interview with Arundhati Roy, the Author of *The God of Small Things*

Martin GANI*

Arundhati Roy, the famed Indian writer, has become an icon of many things ‘anti,’ anti-nuclear power, anti-dam, anti-globalisation, anti-war. In person she appears shy, vulnerable and graceful. Her luminous, dark-brown eyes seem to go on smiling even when her face occasionally is not. When she starts speaking, her balanced, Indian harmony is still there but the articulation and especially the power of her responses are utterly unexpected from her delicate persona.



Roy won Britain’s most prestigious literary award, the Booker Prize, for her debut novel, *The God of Small Things*, in 1997. The book soon became a huge success, within the first few months of the announcement of the prize it earned her in excess of \$1m. Since then it has been translated into 40 languages and sold over 7 million copies. So why hasn’t she written another novel, “I’m a creature of instinct,” she says, “I’m unable to follow rules, I can’t plan things in advance and predict the outcome. I think, people should try out new things. When *God of Small Things* became a best-seller and consequently I became famous, everybody expected me to produce another novel and carry on writing similar fiction. Isn’t that what successful authors do? One can move from one art form to another; as long as the final product is good, that’s fine, bad art is just bad art in whatever form it may be.”

True to her words, Roy has used different forms of expression to convey her art and feelings. I first met her not at a literary gathering or a book signing event, but at the Locarno International Film Festival, Switzerland, where she was invited to speak on the ‘Role of a Writer in Society’ and also to bring a feature film she wrote back in 1989, designed the sets for and starred in, as well as to present a documentary, *Dam: Nations*, she made for the BBC.

Despite her literary fame, Roy’s career in the arts began as an actress. After she left university with a degree in architecture, she eventually got a job with the National Institute of Urban Affairs; one day while cycling to her office, she was spotted by her future husband the filmmaker Pradeep Krishen who must have liked free-spirited Arundhati stylishly gliding down the road, her long wavy hair flying close behind. He offered her a small part in a film, *Massey Saab*, he was making. Shortly after her cinema debut, Roy got a scholarship to study monument restoration techniques in Italy. Eight months later she was back in Delhi; she met up with Krishen and began writing a 26-episode epic, *Banyan Tree*, for TV. To her dismay three episodes later, the project was cancelled by the UK production company, ITV. Undeterred, she wrote the screenplay for a feature film, *In Which Annie Gives It Those Ones*, where she took the lead role. This autobiographical, enjoyable story, set in the Architecture Department of New Delhi University, recounts the vicissitudes of a group of students with an entertaining tone, but it failed to find a distributor and had its first public showing only recently at Locarno Film Festival, Roy remarks “I was prepared to be very embarrassed by it, but having seen it again after all these years, I see that the seeds of my rebellious nature are there.”

In 1992, Roy scripted another film, *Electric Moon*, for Britain’s Channel Four; it attracted mixed feelings but was not exactly a huge success. When it first came out, Roy commented, “The movie I had in my head was different from the one we shot, I wanted a more anarchic quality, but I didn’t know enough about cinema to make that come through on the screen.” Roy is not alone when it comes to belittling the final result of a cinematographic effort, Woody Allen went on record with, “The idea in my mind is always superb, but by the time the film’s made, it’s never exactly as I wanted it.” Today, of her script writing stretch, she says, “I consider myself a failed script writer, but I value failure much more than success, it makes you human again, you’re back on Earth appreciating the simpler things in life.”

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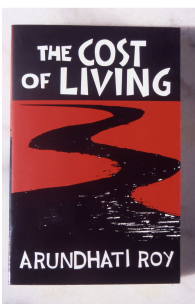
Suzanna Arundhati Roy was born in the village of Ayemenem, Kerala on 24 Nov. 1961 out of an unhappy marriage between a Christian woman from Kerala and a Bengali Hindu. She hardly ever mentions her father. Her mother, Mary Roy, ran an informal school where daughter Roy began her education, acquired linguistic, literary skills and developed intellectual qualities in an unconventional setting. Her mother gave her a book called *Free Writing*, and was encouraged to write fearlessly, from the heart. The same ambience in Kerala was the backbone of Roy's autobiographical novel, just like her childhood it is set in 1960s and poetically narrates the lives of two children, the boy Estha and the girl Rehal, non-identical twins separated in age by 18 minutes. They live with their divorced mother, Ammu, their aunt, uncle and grandparents who run a pickle factory. The arrival of a cousin, Sophie Mol from England for a brief visit, changes their lives forever.

The book attracted much praise, *The New York Times Book Review* printed "The quality of Ms. Roy's narration is so extraordinary - at once so morally strenuous and so imaginatively supple - that the reader remains enthralled all the way through." As Roy herself comments, "It isn't a book about India...it's a book about human nature", it is however, also about the place the author grew up in. She agrees, "My mother would say, why don't you just call the river, the river, or invent a name. I called places with their real names and described their precise geographical locations; when we pass on, I want the places to be remembered, to live on as they were, in my stories." On the possibility of making a feature film out of it, Roy shakes her head, "I wrote it in a way that it can't be made into a film."

It took Roy five years to write *God of Small Things*. It all began when the author envisioned a sky blue Plymouth [car] awaiting at a railway crossing with the twins sitting inside it whilst a Marxist procession raged around them. Starting from this key image, she set off telling her tale, and didn't even realise for a while it was turning into a book. She blended poetic descriptions, expressive inventions and experimental language to filter the world through the eyes of children; many details of what adults would consider insignificant were rendered significant. The book didn't have a title literally until the last minute it was despatched for publication until Roy realised it was really about small things in life and made sure it got into the title as the most representative element in her novel.



The time it took to put down on paper isn't indicative of re-writing in Roy's case, "The only way I can explain how I wrote it," she says, "was the way an architect designs a building. It's not as if I started at the beginning and ended at the end. I would start somewhere and I'd colour a bit and then I would deeply stretch back and stretch forward when I write I never re-write a sentence, because for me my thoughts and my writing are one thing. It's like breathing, I don't re-breathe a breath. Arranging the plot took time but was never painful. Everything I have - my intellect, my experience, my feelings have been used. If someone doesn't like it, it is like saying they don't like my gall bladder. I can't do anything about it."



In the aftermath of her novel's huge success, Roy turned to non-fiction writing and penned two essays, "The Greater Common Good", and "The End of Imagination" published under the title, *The Cost of Living*, the former critically chronicles the 3,200 dam building projects in the Narmada Valley, central India, highlighting the plight of the local people awaiting displacement in their hundreds of thousands, the latter questions India's insistence on nuclear power and bombs. Six more essays on power politics, democracy and war were incorporated into *The Cost of Living* to produce another book, "The Algebra of Infinite Justice" which received a prize from India's National Academy of Letters, Sahitya Akademi, in 2006, Roy, turned it down!

I asked Roy what particular event, if any, pushed her into journalism after such a promising start as a fiction writer. "I have written journalistic pieces also in the past," she responds, "but I wasn't that well-known then and nobody took much notice. There isn't a specific event I can recall, but when our government tested nuclear bombs (in 1998) I was shocked, I felt I had to speak my mind against it."

How does Arundhati Roy cope with fame and success? A more elaborate answer came in a quote from her essay, "The End of Imagination", she read out at the meeting with writers, journalists and public

alike at Locarno Film Festival I attended. A close friend she met in New York raised the issue by reminding Roy, "In this last year you've had too much of everything, fame, money, prizes, adulation, criticism, condemnation, love, hate, generosity, everything. It's a perfect story. Perfectly baroque in its excess. It can only have one ending." Roy: "I told her, hers was an external view of things, this assumption that the trajectory of a person's happiness or fulfilment had peaked and now must trough because she had accidentally stumbled on 'success.' It was premised on the unimaginative belief that wealth and fame were mandatory stuff of everybody's dreams. "You've lived in New York too long" I told her. "There are other worlds, other kinds of dreams. Dreams in which failure is feasible, honourable... The only dream worth having is to dream that you will live while you're alive and die when you're dead." "Which means what?" her friend enquired, Roy wrote this on a paper napkin in response: "To love. To be loved. To never forget your own insignificance. To never get used to the unspeakable violence and the vulgar disparity of life around you. To seek joy in the saddest places. To pursue beauty to its lair. To never simplify what is complicated or complicate what is simple. To respect strength, never power. Above all, to watch. To try to understand. To never look away. And never, never, forget."

After the film festival I met Roy once again, this time at an international literature festival in the Italian city of Mantua. She appeared just as graceful, controlled and just as resolved to her 'anti' causes. I repeated the question I asked her at Locarno. "Is there a new novel on the horizon? She was still non-committal but added, "With fiction you can show that our world has beauty and gentleness and happiness, otherwise, if you are not able to create beauty, what are you fighting for?" And fighting she is but not with fiction, in Nov. 2004 Roy was awarded the Sydney Peace Prize for her fight against war both as a writer and campaigner around the world. In June 2005, she was a protagonist at the World Tribunal on Iraq held in Istanbul, condemning the war in the torn country. Roy calls the invasion of Iraq, 'The Most Cowardly War in History.'

In September 2009 Roy was back in Italy... This time I came across her at a Circolo dei Lettori (Readers' Club), she was together with the British author journalist, Booker Prize winner, John Berger with whom she shares similar sociological values and ideals. Roy brought along her latest book of essays, *Listening to Grasshoppers*, translated also into Italian. This time the busy writer was questioning the meaning of democracy, its deformation that at times makes it resemble fascism. Berger described the Indian author with these accurate words, "I admire Roy very much. She's a good writer and very courageous woman. As she demonstrated in her latest book, she offers a historic, profound vision, a way out of being bombarded by misleading information and a way out of a capitalism dominated by finance with no future prospects."

Some writers find inspiration within themselves, Roy and Berger seem to be more interested in what goes on around them, Berger and Roy explain in unison, "We are out there with our eyes well open trying to choose among a thousand stories that surround us, stories that mark, impress on our world, our society the most, and then we make the effort to transform them into a narrative that readers can understand too." I did not ask Roy if she's planning to write another novel.