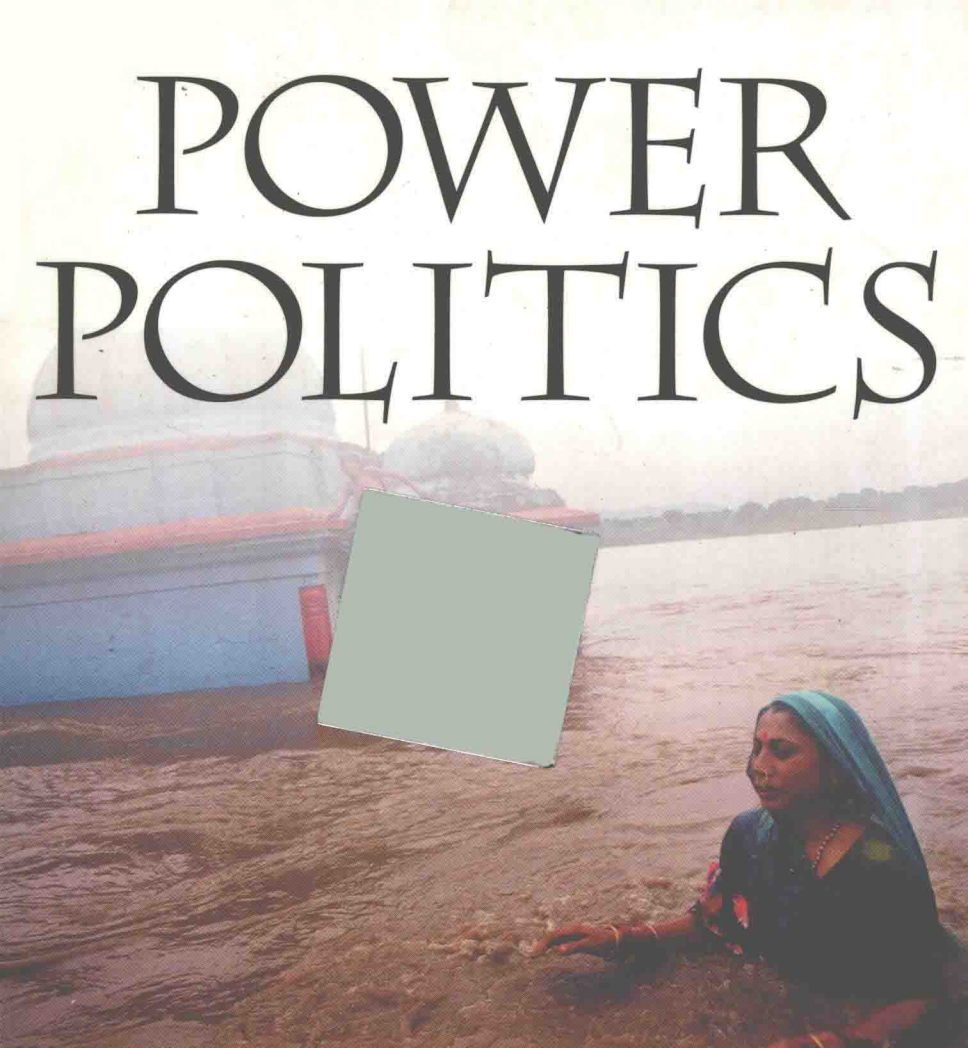


POWER POLITICS

A photograph of a woman in a blue sari wading through muddy, brown water. She is looking down at something in her hands. To her left is the side of a boat with a blue and red stripe. In the background, there are some structures and a hazy sky. A light green rectangular box is placed over the water in the middle ground.

ARUNDHATI ROY

NOW INCLUDES
"THE ALGEBRA OF INFINITE JUSTICE"
AND "WAR IS PEACE"

FROM THE AUTHOR OF THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

POWER POLITICS

SECOND EDITION

ARUNDHATI ROY

**SOUTH END PRESS
CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS**

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Cover design by Ellen P. Shapiro

Cover photograph: August 1999: A woman bathes next to the half-submerged temple at Khotewar, a village on the banks of the Narmada river. The temple was in use until a couple of years ago but has since been submerged due to a rise in water level, a direct result of the Sardar Sarovar Dam. Photograph by Karen Robinson.

Second edition. First printing.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Roy, Arundhati.

Power politics / Arundhati Roy. — 2nd ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-89608-669-0 (cloth) — ISBN 0-89608-668-2 (pbk.)

1. India — politics and government — 1977– I. Title.

JQ231 .R69 2001
320.954—dc21



South End Press, 7 Brookline Street, #1
Cambridge, MA 02139-4146
www.southendpress.org

05 04 03 02 01

1 2 3 4 5



PRINTED IN CANADA

Book Sense 76 selection — November/December 2001.

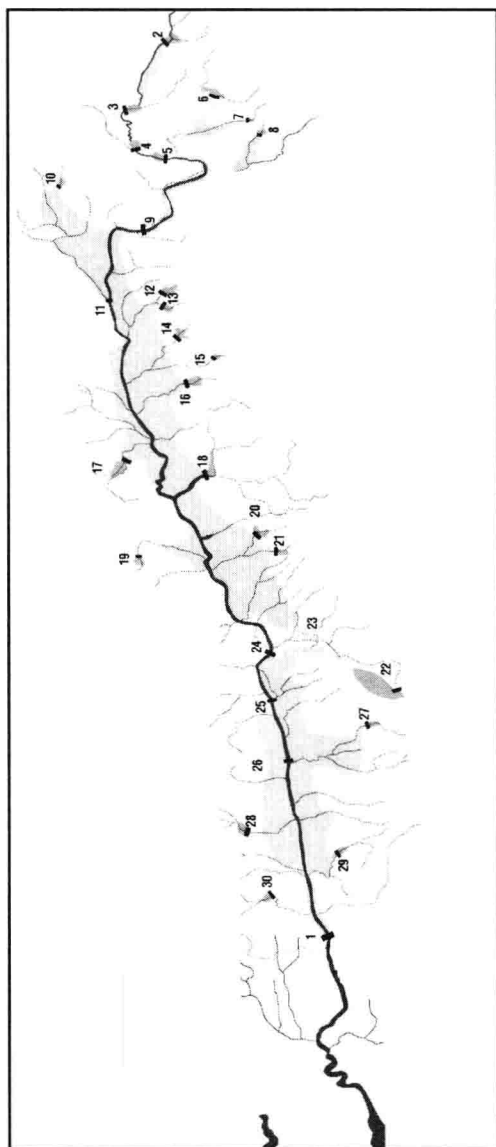
Los Angeles Times “Discoveries” selection, October 2001.

The novelist Arundhati Roy ... has emerged as India’s most impassioned critic of globalization.

—*New York Times*

Arundhati Roy’s essays evoke a stark image of two Indias being driven “resolutely in opposite directions,” a small India on its way to a “glittering destination” while the rest “melts into the darkness and disappears”—a microcosm of much of the world, she observes, though “in India your face is slammed right up against it.” Traced with sensitivity and skill, the unfolding picture is interlaced with provocative reflections on the writer’s mission and burden, and inspiring accounts of the “spectacular struggles” of popular movements that “refuse to lie down and die.” Another impressive work by a fine writer.

—Noam Chomsky



Map of Proposed Big Dams in the Narmada valley. 1: Sardar Sarovar, 2: Upper Narmada, 3: Raghavpur, 4: Rosara, 5: Singarpur, 6: Upper Burhner, 7: Halon, 8: Tawa, 9: Bargi, 10: Ataria, 11: Chinki, 12: Sher, 13: Machherva, 14: Shakkar, 15: Siterawa, 16: Dudhi, 17: Barna, 18: Tawa, 19: Morand, 20: Kolar, 21: Ganjal, 22: Sukta, 23: Punassa Lift, 24: Indira Sagar, 25: Omkareshwar, 26: Maheshwar, 27: Upper Veda, 28: Maan, 29: Lower Goli, 30: Jobat. Map by Ian Nixon and New Internationalist, courtesy of Maggie Black. Additional production by Christopher Mattison.

INDIA AND THE NARMADA VALLEY

- National boundary
- State boundary
- National capital
- ✱ Nuclear test site
- Dam
- Kashmir

Narmada Valley Proposed Dam Projects

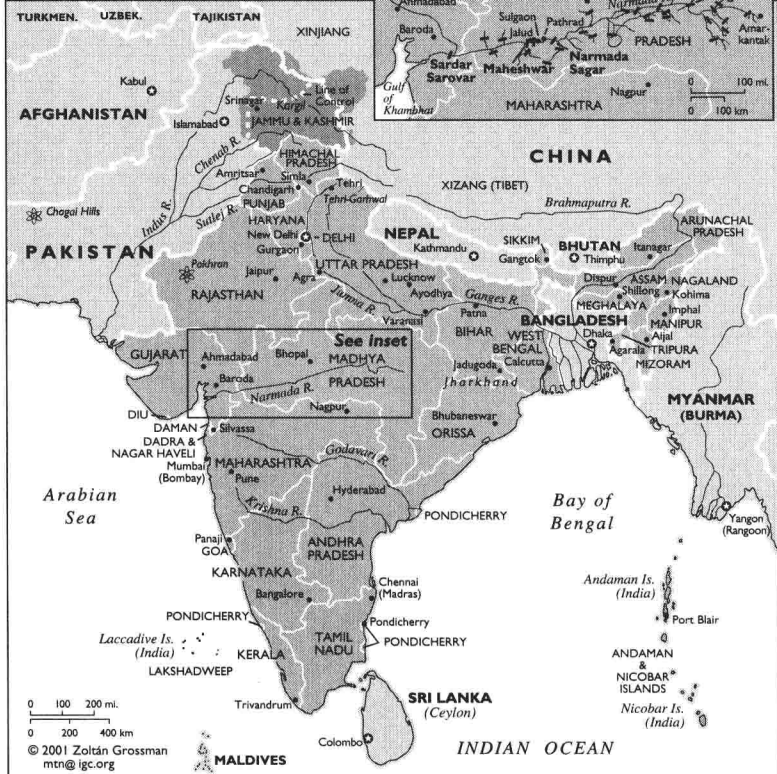
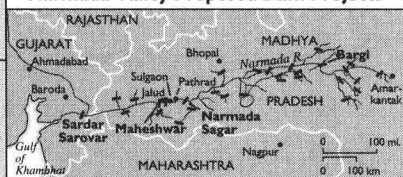


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THE LADIES HAVE FEELINGS, SO . . .

SHALL WE LEAVE IT TO THE EXPERTS?

India lives in several centuries at the same time. Somehow we manage to progress and regress simultaneously. As a nation we age by pushing outward from the middle — adding a few centuries on to either end of our extraordinary c.v. We greatnessen like the maturing head of a hammerhead shark with eyes looking in diametrically opposite directions. I have no doubt that even here in North America you have heard that Germany is considering changing its immigration laws in order to import Indian software engineers. I have even less doubt that

Based on a talk, given as the Third Annual Eqbal Ahmad Lecture, February 15, 2001, at Hampshire College, Amherst, Massachusetts.

Arundhati Roy

you've heard of the Naga Sadhu at the Kumbh Mela who towed the District Commissioner's car with his penis while the Commissioner sat in it solemnly with his wife and children.

As Indian citizens we subsist on a regular diet of caste massacres and nuclear tests, mosque breakings and fashion shows, church burnings and expanding cell phone networks, bonded labor and the digital revolution, female infanticide and the Nasdaq crash, husbands who continue to burn their wives for dowry and our delectable stockpile of Miss Worlds. I don't mean to put a simplistic value judgment on this peculiar form of "progress" by suggesting that Modern is Good and Traditional is Bad — or vice versa. What's hard to reconcile oneself to, both personally and politically, is the schizophrenic nature of it. That applies not just to the ancient/modern conundrum, but to the utter illogic of what appears to be the current national enterprise. In the lane behind my house, every night I walk past road gangs of emaciated laborers digging a trench to lay fiber-optic cables to speed up our digital revolution. In the bitter winter cold, they work by the light of a few candles.

It's as though the people of India have been rounded

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up and loaded onto two convoys of trucks (a huge big one and a tiny little one) that have set off resolutely in opposite directions. The tiny convoy is on its way to a glittering destination somewhere near the top of the world. The other convoy just melts into the darkness and disappears. A cursory survey that tallies the caste, class, and religion of who gets to be on which convoy would make a good Lazy Person's Concise Guide to the History of India. For some of us, life in India is like being suspended between two of the trucks, one in each convoy, and being neatly dismembered as they move apart, not bodily, but emotionally and intellectually.

Of *course* India is a microcosm of the world. Of *course* versions of what happens there happen everywhere. Of *course*, if you're willing to look, the parallels are easy to find. The difference in India is only in the scale, the magnitude, and the sheer proximity of the disparity. In India your face is slammed right up against it. To address it, to deal with it, to not deal with it, to try and understand it, to insist on not understanding it, to simply survive it — on a daily, hourly basis — is a fine art in itself. Either an art or a form of insular, inward-looking insanity. Or both.

Arundhati Roy

To be a writer — a supposedly “famous” writer — in a country where three hundred million people are illiterate is a dubious honor. To be a writer in a country that gave the world Mahatma Gandhi, that invented the concept of nonviolent resistance, and then, half a century later, followed that up with nuclear tests is a ferocious burden. (Though no more ferocious a burden, it has to be said, than being a writer in a country that has enough nuclear weapons to destroy the earth several times over.) To be a writer in a country where something akin to an undeclared civil war is being waged on its subjects in the name of “development” is an onerous responsibility. When it comes to writers and writing, I use words like “onerous” and “responsibility” with a heavy heart and not a small degree of sadness.

This is what I’m here to talk to you, to think aloud with you, about. What is the role of writers and artists in society? Do they have a definable role? Can it be fixed, described, characterized in any definite way? Should it be?

Personally, I can think of few things more terrifying than if writers and artists were charged with an immutable charter of duties and responsibilities that they had to live and work by. Imagine if there was this little black

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book — a sort of Approved Guide to Good Writing — that said: All writers shall be politically conscious and sexually moral, or: All writers should believe in God, globalization, and the joys of family life

Rule One for a writer, as far as I'm concerned, is There Are No Rules. And Rule Two (since Rule One was made to be broken) is There Are No Excuses for Bad Art. Painters, writers, singers, actors, dancers, filmmakers, musicians are meant to fly, to push at the frontiers, to worry the edges of the human imagination, to conjure beauty from the most unexpected things, to find magic in places where others never thought to look. If you limit the trajectory of their flight, if you weight their wings with society's existing notions of morality and responsibility, if you truss them up with preconceived values, you subvert their endeavor.

A good or great writer may refuse to accept any responsibility or morality that society wishes to impose on her. Yet the best and greatest of them know that if they abuse this hard-won freedom, it can only lead to bad art. There is an intricate web of morality, rigor, and responsibility that art, that writing itself, imposes on a writer. It's singular, it's individual, but nevertheless it's there. At its

Arundhati Roy

best, it's an exquisite bond between the artist and the medium. At its acceptable end, it's a sort of sensible co-operation. At its worst, it's a relationship of disrespect and exploitation.

The absence of external rules complicates things. There's a very thin line that separates the strong, true, bright bird of the imagination from the synthetic, noisy bauble. Where is that line? How do you recognize it? How do you know you've crossed it? At the risk of sounding esoteric and arcane, I'm tempted to say that you just know. The fact is that nobody — no reader, no reviewer, agent, publisher, colleague, friend, or enemy — can tell for sure. A writer just has to ask herself that question and answer it as honestly as possible. The thing about this “line” is that once you learn to recognize it, once you see it, it's impossible to ignore. You have no choice but to live with it, to follow it through. You have to bear with all its complexities, contradictions, and demands. And that's not always easy. It doesn't always lead to compliments and standing ovations. It can lead you to the strangest, wildest places. In the midst of a bloody military coup, for instance, you could find yourself fascinated by the mating rituals of a purple sunbird, or the se-

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cret life of captive goldfish, or an old aunt's descent into madness. And nobody can say that there isn't truth and art and beauty in that. Or, on the contrary, in the midst of putative peace, you could, like me, be unfortunate enough to stumble on a silent war. The trouble is that once you see it, you can't unsee it. And once you've seen it, keeping quiet, saying nothing, becomes as political an act as speaking out. There's no innocence. Either way, you're accountable.

Today, perhaps more so than in any other era in history, the writer's right to free speech is guarded and defended by the civil societies and state establishments of the most powerful countries in the world. Any overt attempt to silence or muffle a voice is met with furious opposition. The writer is embraced and protected. This is a wonderful thing. The writer, the actor, the musician, the filmmaker — they have become radiant jewels in the crown of modern civilization. The artist, I imagine, is finally as free as he or she will ever be. Never before have so many writers had their books published. (And now, of course, we have the Internet.) Never before have we been more commercially viable. We live and prosper in the heart of the marketplace. True, for every so-called

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success there are hundreds who “fail.” True, there are myriad art forms, both folk and classical, myriad languages, myriad cultural and artistic traditions that are being crushed and cast aside in the stampede to the big bumper sale in Wonderland. Still, there have never been more writers, singers, actors, or painters who have become influential, wealthy superstars. And they, the successful ones, spawn a million imitators, they become the torchbearers, their work becomes the benchmark for what art is, or ought to be.

Nowadays in India the scene is almost farcical. Following the recent commercial success of some Indian authors, Western publishers are desperately prospecting for the next big Indo-Anglian work of fiction. They’re doing everything short of interviewing English-speaking Indians for the post of “writer.” Ambitious middle-class parents who, a few years ago, would only settle for a future in Engineering, Medicine, or Management for their children, now hopefully send them to creative writing schools. People like myself are constantly petitioned by computer companies, watch manufacturers, even media magnates to endorse their products. A boutique owner in Bombay once asked me if he could “display” my book

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The God of Small Things (as if it were an accessory, a bracelet or a pair of earrings) while he filmed me shopping for clothes! Jhumpa Lahiri, the American writer of Indian origin who won the Pulitzer Prize, came to India recently to have a traditional Bengali wedding. The wedding was reported on the front page of national newspapers.

Now where does all this lead us? Is it just harmless nonsense that's best ignored? How does all this ardent wooing affect our art? What kind of lenses does it put in our spectacles? How far does it remove us from the world around us?

There is very real danger that this neoteric seduction can shut us up far more effectively than violence and repression ever could. We have free speech. Maybe. But do we have Really Free Speech? If what we have to say doesn't "sell," will we still say it? Can we? Or is everybody looking for Things That Sell to say? Could writers end up playing the role of palace entertainers? Or the subtle twenty-first-century version of court eunuchs attending to the pleasures of our incumbent CEOs? You know — naughty, but nice. Risqué perhaps, but not risky.

Arundhati Roy

It has been nearly four years now since my first, and so far only, novel, *The God of Small Things*, was published. In the early days, I used to be described — introduced — as the author of an almost freakishly “successful” (if I may use so vulgar a term) first book. Nowadays I’m introduced as something of a freak myself. I am, apparently, what is known in twenty-first-century vernacular as a “writer-activist.” (Like a sofa-bed.)

Why am I called a “writer-activist” and why — even when it’s used approvingly, admiringly — does that term make me flinch? I’m called a writer-activist because after writing *The God of Small Things* I wrote three political essays: “The End of Imagination,” about India’s nuclear tests, “The Greater Common Good,” about Big Dams and the “development” debate, and “Power Politics: The Reincarnation of Rumpelstiltskin,” about the privatization and corporatization of essential infrastructure like water and electricity. Apart from the building of the temple in Ayodhya, these currently also happen to be the top priorities of the Indian government.

Now, I’ve been wondering why it should be that the person who wrote *The God of Small Things* is called a writer, and the person who wrote the political essays is