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Of Moral Positions and Nuclear War: Novelist Arundhati Roy as Peace Activist

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Abstract

This study uses the theoretical framework of cosmopolitanism to study political dissent by feminist activist Arundhati Roy, post 1997, when India tested its nuclear capability. Though the essay focuses on Arundhati Roy as an important literary and media figure, it also examines Amitav Ghosh's *Countdown* which serves as an equally powerful literary voice, a contrast to Roy's work. In itself, *Countdown*, and the *End of Imagination* are important artifacts of peace activist research in a national and regional climate where most were liable to rejoice nuclear testing by India rather than to detract. *End of Imagination* marks the start of Roy's post-Booker Prize career as an activist. Roy gains recognition as transnational feminist and continues to write and deliver speeches at significant global forums, therefore, her anti-nuclear essay is noteworthy and historic.

Keywords: feminism, peace activism, South Asia, India, transnational, cosmopolitanism, anti-nuclear essays, critical theory

Nuclear testing and its aftermath: Loss of moral ground

India carried out its first test for a nuclear device in 1974. Indira Gandhi's Congress Party was in power then. Since then, India maintained moral ground as a peace-loving nation for it has not used its nuclear know-how to devise a bomb. The border skirmishes and wars with Pakistan (from 1971 until 1997) showed nuclear-weapon use restraint on part of both the nations. The question then is why did India choose to perform a series of nuclear tests between May 11 and 13, 1998 in Pokhran, Rajasthan? Almost predictably Pakistan tested its own nuclear arsenal within 11 days, on May 28, 1998. This bold step, coded as bellicose, had an immediate reaction in the West. What followed was a United States declaration of outrage at the testing. Other participant nations of the US-led nuclear non-proliferation treaty CTBT (Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty), of which India is notably not a co-signatory, followed suit in their protestations.

News coverage of the issue in the *New York Times* during May and June of 1998 told an interesting story. The United States was struck more by the inability of its intelligence agencies to foretell this act than the occurrence of the testing event itself (Sengupta, 1998, May 21; Weiner, 1998, May 13; Weiner, 1998, June 7). The *New York Times* columnist, Tom Weiner, while ironically implying the US would never take this step, simultaneously berates the CIA of mirror-imaging or believing another nation to have priorities similar to the US (Weiner, 1998). In hindsight, the reaction of other nuclear arms bearing nations to the act of nuclear testing by India, can be described knee-jerk and undeniably hasty at best—a rap on the knuckles for refusing to ratify the CTBT. Policy analyst Bhaskar Roy (2008, July 18) reported that “Indian scientists and engineers working in the USA under bilateral agreements were bundled out of the country over night. Indian scientists were also blacklisted from visiting the US even for international conferences” (para. 13). Economic and trade sanctions were imposed by Japan, US, Denmark, Sweden, and other Western nations, amidst apocalyptic accounts of a possible nuclear war in the region. According to news reports in the western press in 1998, allegations of political immaturity and of de-stabilizing the tenuous power equation in the South Asian region were flung at India (Burns, 1998).

Using the nuclear bomb as political currency to assert global and regional supremacy reveals itself as having been a conscious strategy of the Indian Government (Vajpayee's Hindutva BJP government). According to scholars, the logics and narratives of nationhood need to be continually built so as to maintain the nation's saliency (Bhabha, 1990). In the wake of mass scale celebration, it seemed that Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence and secularism for post-colonial India may have failed to give citizens the sense of nationality and cohesivity that the possession of the bomb apparently has. Even the strongest critics of nuclear weaponry nodded in agreement that nuclear arms are important global currency to maintain self-respect. In alignment, reports of Indian citizens and expatriates rejoicing in the streets filled national and international newspapers along with accompanying accounts, though somewhat muted in comparison, of grassroots, civil society protest (Sengupta, 1998). Indian peace activists denounced state-centered justifications of testing for the sake of countering border aggression from Pakistan and China, and for exposing the hypocrisy of nuclear arms-bearing western nations. They urged politicians to keep their thoughts and their national budgets focused on issues of poverty, food, education and housing.

Rationale of the study

Roy and Ghosh's writings carry weight in this morally confusing time. This paper emerged from an analysis of the press writings of two novelists Arundhati Roy and Amitav Ghosh, soon after India completed nuclear testing in Pokhran in May 1998. Roy published in *Onlooker*, an Indian magazine, and Ghosh in the far more cosmopolite *The New Yorker*. Both essays were later published as books, Roy's, in an anthology by Viking Press in 2001, titled *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*, (along with her nuclear war essay *The End of Imagination*), and Ghosh's as a single publication, *Countdown*, by Ravi Dayal publishers. Though my essay focuses on Arundhati Roy as an important literary and media figure, Amitav Ghosh's *Countdown* serves as an equally powerful literary voice, a contrast to Roy's work. In itself, *Countdown*, and the *End of Imagination* are important artifacts of peace activist research in a national and regional climate where most were liable to rejoice rather than to detract. *End of Imagination* marks the start of Roy's post-Booker Prize career as activist. She continues to write speeches and

deliver them overseas and at significant global forums, therefore, her anti-nuclear essay is noteworthy and historic.

Cosmopolitan peace activism

With the number of wars and battles the world has fought and continues to fight, one would be hard-pressed to believe that there is an active global peace movement at all. While grassroots peace movements have configured and dissolved with each new war, academics have had a small role to play in sustaining the momentum of peace work. Academia is an important ally for buttressing the efforts of any new or emerging movement. Therefore, universities in the US and overseas have not been impervious to the need for the study of non-violence and peace. Non-violence and peace research have been embraced by academia, mostly Western academia, as legitimate fields of study with the establishment of departments of conflict resolution and in-house peace institutes. Whereas such study is not always financially well-endowed, the institution building around peace scholarship remains a visible reminder of the work of scholars who understand large-scale conflict, and who have an important role in raising the critical consciousness of students against violence and oppression in their own cultures.

These scholars focus on the two chief typographies of violence that exist today; nation upon nation (often border and sovereignty-related) violence, and the internal, communal and ethnic minority-related strife. Philosophers, writers, and respected thinkers in every embattled society have occasionally used their public image to carve a forum for their brand of peace protest. It is vital to link the writings of popular transnational literary figures to a larger, transnational, cosmopolitan peace movement.

The philosophical dilemma embedded in my inquiry and choice of topic is how does a writer advocate and rally for peace during a regional, a global, nuclear race for supremacy? The answer to that question does not have complete closure in this paper though it is important for me, as a researcher and writer, to articulate it. To some extent, novelists Arundhati Roy and Amitav Ghosh certainly draw attention to ongoing activism at the national level, and through their own travels, rouse international grassroots support for their political position.

Geopolitics today dictates that membership into the haloed developed countries club, is most often economically defined by its G-8 or G-20 designation. Membership is contingent upon nuclear warhead accumulation, as part of a national alliance such as North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO], or as a result of another regional military strategic alliance. Can a set of writings emerge as part of a movement we can hesitantly term as the peace movement? Is it too lofty to call the writings of prominent writers and thinkers as defining a peace movement?

Arundhati Roy as activist

Novelist and 1997 Booker Prize winner Arundhati Roy's writings and public statements of protest stand out. Her most powerful statement came less than a year after she was declared a Booker Prize winner. As a visible and vocal figure, best known internationally for her novel *God of Small Things*, Roy is also established as a media personality. Roy has acted and written for theatre, and featured in a television feature film that she scripted prior to the success of her novel. Arundhati Roy continues to engage in the media that she herself has created and was featured in at different times of her career. She clearly is a "natural" for fielding public and media attention. I was a young college student when I saw Roy's 1989 production *In Which Annie Gives It Those Ones*. The film is a tribute to the culture of college-going students and to the variety of English spoken in India's capital, New Delhi, by its youth (Roy, 1989). So, as observer of Roy's rise to fame with the Booker award, I am interested in making connections between her career as a writer and the small but powerful minority of peace activists who publicly came out against the government's utopian dreams for a nuclear capable state.

Two other Indian writers, Aravind Adiga for *The White Tiger*, and Kiran Desai for *Inheritance of Loss*, are recent recipients of the Man Booker Prize following Arundhati Roy's earlier felicitation, but the press has been unable to keep them active in the imagination of the news-reading and news-listening middle class. Arundhati Roy has been able to maintain this exposure because she takes her career as an activist seriously. Roy is known to have given her entire Booker award to the Narmada Bachao Andolan, a civil society organization that mobilized human rights activists, farmers, environmentalists, and the local community to protest the building of the Sardar

Sarvovar Dam in Gujarat, India. Narmada Bachao Andolan is headed by the remarkable feminist leader, Medha Patkar, whose determination and grit have made the Indian public and the government functionaries aware of the dangers of large hydroelectric dam projects, dangers which have resulted in hundreds of thousands of fatalities and ousted refugees without adequate rehabilitation.¹ It is not the Booker Prize that makes the writer a prominent activist, it is the writer's conviction and background.

Amitav Ghosh's *Countdown*, 1999

Countdown has largely escaped critical literary scrutiny of the academic community. It was a powerful offering at an important moment in India's historicity with the nuclear bomb. Using a seasoned ethnographic approach, trained anthropologist and novelist Amitav Ghosh conducted a series of interviews in an effort to understand the rhetorical value and political imperative of the Indian and the Pakistani governments to conduct nuclear tests. The writers' narrative unfolded a grim story of nation building, religious communalism, and impending war at the cost of destruction of natural habitats and disease onset among rural citizens living in the testing grounds. He commented on the strong arm tactics of the American and European nations who chastised India for carrying out nuclear tests while ignoring their own stashes of nuclear weapons, despite their membership to the United Nations Security Council. The US and European economic embargo against India happened during a formative time in the contemporary economic history of the nation. Some key areas of trade were left in hiatus and certain levels of U.S. and European personnel were withdrawn from the country ostensibly to avert a nuclear lock-horn situation between Indian and Pakistan. Despite the imperatives of globalization sweeping the country, and in a world forum, India was formally chastised for pursuing its nuclear ambitions. The nation had no choice but to accept this penalty that seriously impacted its marketing of itself as an attractive destination for multinational business.

Ghosh (1999) elaborated on why the bomb is strategically significant for both India and Pakistan as former colonies of the British Raj. On the Indian side, his interview with Subrahmanyam, the Director of Indian Institute of Strategic Studies, yielded, "nuclear weapons are not military weapons, their logic is that of international politics" (Ghosh,

1999, p. 13). Another interviewee, a historian added another dimension to the bomb-as-currency argument. Chandan Mitra believed that post colonial national pride and self-esteem is hinged upon the 1998 testing—a recouping of the democratic postcolonial self (Ghosh, 1999). India needed something large, with decidedly offensive potential, to be noticed in the global arena as a significant player. On the Pakistani side, the intellectuals were terrified of the Pakistani and Indian nuclear tests because war and proliferation now seemed more imminent. The specter of the Taliban holding sway in Pakistani politics is always upon them, and in that reality, the illogic of war may give way to use of nuclear weapons in the region.

While deconstructing the logic of nation building, the plight of the average person was described in detail by Ghosh, who traveled to Pokhran, the test site, to see the aftermath of the destruction. Since 1974, the water sources in Pokhran are destroyed, children have been born with limb deformities, cattle are blind and their udders have tumors. Their quality of life is eroded with little compensation from the Government. The BJP government even planned to carry the soil from Pokhran to the rest of the country for people to bask in its “glow” (Ghosh, 1998, p.6). These unbelievable portrayals allow Ghosh’s important treatise to be left open for the reader to gain a sense of the inherent attraction and repulsion of the nuclear arms race, given India and Pakistan’s shared colonial history, their political enmity, and the reality of contemporary communal dialectics of the region.

Conveying politics through artistic, literary form

Literary and speech genres, unlike their counterpart in biology, which seems to have more stable nomenclature, emerge anew all the time. In recent time the emergence of talk-stories and talk-poetry, (or spoken word poetry) have revived folk and communal forms of nonlinear storytelling and narrative to express modern political realities. The spoken word and talk genres have served a way to bridge the rural/urban divide between folk art forms and their more urbane, easily consumable counterparts in the form of political writing of various kinds. The recouping of these hybrid genres has been ameliorating for the writer as well as the intended audience, listener or reader. While talk-stories have been used effectively in postcolonial diasporic fiction, spoken word

oration has been used effectively by those who want to convey political content in an artistic, literary form. While I am not suggesting either genre for Roy's written and edited work, I believe her work can fall within the hybrid literary forms I have suggested. I also want to emphasize that her original writings are often speeches for large gatherings of members of civil society who look upon her grassroots work as inspiration; or press writings that draw vividly upon her own life and experience in India.

Roy's work is often read as essays on politics. While the essay form accommodates a great number of styles of prose writing I wonder if the connotation of "essay" is confining to the mode that Roy chooses to write in, since she dabbles in journalism, speech writing, performance, and political writing about local grassroots causes and transnational global capital. Rao (2008) examines Roy's nonfiction to recoup the neglected genre of essay within Departments of English, to show Roy's masterful handling of the essay form using the rhetoric of subversive politics and radical cosmopolitanism. Purdue (2003) raises a problem that Sarojini Naidu faced a hundred years ago as a poet in English, and has re-surfaced to haunt the reception of Arundhati Roy as activist and writer in English. The fact that Roy merges literary and speech forms, while playing with the English language, makes critics question her writing abilities and their seriousness of purpose. The rhetoric that Rao (2008) believes is masterful is questioned by critics who reluctantly accept Roy's work as serious literature (Purdue, 2003). Roy's construction by the media as an aesthetically turned out ("mass of untamed curls and smouldering eyes") third world woman (Purdue, 2003, p. 87; see also Mohanty, 1991) does damage to the audience reception of the serious political message she brings to global forums.

Cosmopolitanism of *The End of Imagination*

I wrote this article in the summer of 2009 from India while on leave from a US university where I teach, in part experiencing the context of Roy's essays. In July, during a short strategic trip by Hillary Clinton, the US Secretary of State, key peace issues were reopened in bilateral dialogue, namely nuclear weapons, climate change, Pakistan, terrorism, and Kashmir. India has resisted being a co-signatory for the CTBT, a decision to bypass US leadership that makes the United States nervous. Clinton had cautiously

avoided the topic in her conversations with key political figures on her most recent July 2009 trip, but the press continued to remind the public of its relevance and the fact that it hangs in the air between India and the US, leaving a shadow in the diplomacy between the two nations. The historically charged times in which Roy wrote *End of Imagination* does not seem to have changed, just as there are rumors that India may want to conduct another nuclear test. Given the reality of another nuclear test in India, it is increasingly important that Roy's essay is viewed as a serious piece of literature calling out to grassroots peace activists to mobilize their subversive and creative energies.

I offer the theoretical framework of cosmopolitanism to understand Roy's political stance, her actions and her outrage at the brickbats offered to her by established academics and activists (Ram, 2001), such as Ramachandra Guha, a prominent historian of the environmental movement, and Gail Omvedt, a feminist theorist of social movements. While Roy's solidarity with the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) has been severely criticized by respected academic-activists, she continues to give monetary and moral support to the NBA (Roy, 2001a; 2001b; 2003). Her cosmopolitanism has been attacked and her methods seen as shallow and ineffective. Her detractors occupy esteemed socio-political institutions such as the judiciary and the government but that does not seem to faze her in the least.

Roy's cosmopolitanism is an acquired consciousness of rootedness to a constituency larger than one's state or nation. Robbins (2006) considers current articulations of "cosmopolitanism" as an interdisciplinary description of the proper attitude or sensibility with regard to the new global realities" (p. 232). It is a consciousness that includes humanity in its ambit while dismissing any kind of provincialism when it comes to world community issues such as war and peace, child and women's rights, or human rights. Appiah (2006) makes a differentiation between rootless cosmopolitanism and rooted cosmopolitanism. The former disregards loyalty to nation without espousing a human cause whereas the latter cosmopolitanism acknowledges national citizenship while participating in issues of common concern to humanity.

Arundhati Roy emerges on the Indian literary firmament as a cosmopolitan figure who wants to share her insight with the masses through cleverly crafted political prose. That Arundhati Roy chose to go against the general mood of exuberance among the masses points to her carefully cultivated cosmopolitanism and awareness of transnational political issues (Szeman, 2006). In *End of Imagination* she referred to her year-long travels after winning the Booker Prize for her fiction. The title of the essay notwithstanding, she was able to imagine the “other” with empathy, as subaltern, and powerless in the face of the state’s absolute power over their destiny. The traveler in her connects local issues with global capitalist imperatives.

In conclusion

The theatricality of Roy’s prose must be seen in the context of her lived experience as screenwriter and theatre personality. “Nuclear weapons pervade our thinking. Control our behaviour. Administer our societies. Inform our dreams. They bury themselves like meat hooks deep in the base of our brains” (Roy, 2001a, p. 12). One can actually hear the spoken quality of what Roy is trying to say. Roy (2001a) calls on her audience to take the accumulation of nuclear weaponry personally, “the bomb isn’t in your backyard. It’s in your body. And mine. Nobody, no nation, no government, no man, no god has the right to put it there” (p.12). The role of the state is protection of its citizenry from harm, therefore the biopolitical control of mind and body is undemocratic and unpardonable. We must protest. Roy will not tolerate excuses because there may not be time for that. Her final call (2001a) draws-in her reader and audience completely, “if you’re not (religious), then look at it this way. This world of ours is 4,600 million years old. It could end in an afternoon” (p. 41).

Both Ghosh and Roy combine personal reflection with collected research data. Ghosh’s *Countdown* leaves us breathless about the future of the nuclear dialectic in South Asia since there is not one but two regional players—India and Pakistan. Whereas Roy’s *The End of Imagination* wakes us up from our stupor to recognize what we take for granted, shakes up status quo at the personal level, and act without being overawed by the state. Both have a powerful message for the reader that makes us mindful of the

overbearing state dictating our thoughts and actions, though only to the extent we allow that to happen.

Note

¹ In their efforts to raise awareness about the hazards of hydroelectric power projects, Medha Patkar and Narmada Bachao Andolan raised awareness about the previous dam failures that have caused thousands of fatalities and ousted refugees without adequate rehabilitation. The Banqiao Dam in Southern China, for example, resulted in the deaths of 171,000 people and left millions homeless. For more please see, for instance, the study by Uddin Nasim (2005), "Lessons learned: Failure of a hydroelectric power project dam".

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