



## The Critical Acumen of Arundhati Roy

Dr(Mrs) J.M.Moholkar

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**Abstract:** Arundhati Roy has made her own contribution to the field of criticism. She is also a creative writer. Her two major works are: *The Algebra Of Infinite Justice* (2001) and *An Ordinary Person's Guide To Empire* (2005). In all the essays in these two volumes Roy is outspoken. The position she takes as a critic is: There's just no pleasing any one. This is what I feel on the subject. No compromise, no flattery, no false praise. Nothing more and nothing less.

**Key words:** combat, conflict, war, peace, damage, repair, democracy, provocation

Conflict, clash, combat are frequently used words in the modern age. All are tech-savy. Children are taught to be tech-savy at a very early age. Children who sacrifice their innocence at a very early age become precocious, over smart for their age. No wonder they are ready to fight for what they want if it is not easy to come to them. A natural willingness to struggle combined with the assistance of technology deepens. This tendency gives a natural birth to the second tendency of usurping, snatching what does not even belong to them. What is a source of enjoyment at that tender age becomes a practice with maturity. When such people, who are temperamentally and by training and practice conflict lovers, occupy important positions in public life, they usher in conflict and clash. Reconciliation, mutual agreement, sitting across the table, discussion are words unknown to them. Even a handful of these people are capable of shaking the peace foundations of vast nations. It is a child's play for them. Such people firmly believe that without a show of might, without a fight, nothing can be achieved. It is difficult to accept that people, societies and even developed nations still believe that peace can be obtained, maintained only with the help of war. I say still believe because the world has already witnessed, suffered the horrors of the first II World Wars. A mother draws attention of a crying baby to the whistling gurkha that is the security guard and the baby stops crying. Similarly, developed nations, the superpowers remind the other

small, developing, but conflict loving nations that they should keep quiet otherwise they know how to quieten them. Against the back-drop of the war like scenario it is pertinent to peruse the views expressed by Arundhati Roy on war.

In *War is Peace* taken from her *The Algebra Of Infinite Justice* (AIJ) Roy very rightly says, "Nothing can excuse or justify an act of terrorism, whether it is committed by religious fundamentalists, private militia, people's resistance movement-or whether it is dressed up as a war of retribution by a recognized government". (Pg 242 AIJ) It is true that when war erupts, it destroys the innocent and the wrong doers, lovers of war, combat and lovers of peace in the same breath. It is an irony of fate that huge piling up of stock of deadly weapons is done as a routine practice to maintain peace. The peace destroying weapons are maintained, safe-guarded for peace. What a paradox! Roy further continues in the same essay, "The bombing of Afghanistan is not revenge for New York and Washington. It is yet another act of terror against the people of the world. Each innocent person that is killed must be added to, not set off against the grisly toll of civilians who died in New York and Washington." (War is Peace pg 242 AIJ)

What is unfortunately not understood by the superpowers is that the people, the civilians to whichever country they belong, either cease to exist or live life in death like the Ancient Mariner in Coleridge's *The Rime of Ancient Mariner*. There is at least a reason for his life in death condition. The mariner inexplicably shoots an albatross considered a favourable omen. The punishment is a natural consequence of his wrong act. Where is such a wrong act by the innocent civilians? Why do they suffer? They suffer because the bloated ego of politicians and those in power demands a war. They cannot rest in peace until there is a disturbance of peace. No agency, no NGO, no government can bring back to life, make green again, make pleasant and tourist worthy the bombarded place. The site, the soil goes for ever. It is an attack for many generations to suffer. Once bombarded always



barren, once bombarded always black sort of a situation. The damage that it does to our planet earth is simply frightening. The thick smoke, the deadly radiation, the unending heat and permanent pollution of air, water and land. Who will repair the damage? Whom should we call responsible for all this? Is this what we mean by maintenance of peace?

Roy Declares that when a country a nation christens a war as operation Infinite Justice or operation Enduring freedom it always is Infinite Injustice and Enduring ,unending Subjugation for others (P-245 war is peace AIJ) A war leaves people disfigured, charred, devastated, and makes them or ungentle and apathetic to all the good things of life. Cruelty propagates cruelty. The meaning of living goes away when life is just another name of death for such people. War torn nations cannot regain the lost peace. Peace is not a bank balance that it can be increased after some time. It is impossible for the war victims to forgive and forget. Roy Rightly says “Hate and retribution don’t go back into the box once you have let them out. For every terrorist or his supporter that is killed, hundreds of innocent people are being killed too. And for every hundred innocent people killed, there is a good chance that several future terrorists will be created. Where will it all lead? ( p-252 war is peace). Roy has voiced the common man’s thought and concern on war. Who’s the real victim? Who wins? Who loses? Ultimately the ordinary man, the lay man is pulverized. “People rarely win wars, governments rarely lose them. People get killed. Governments moults and regroup, hydra headed. They first use flags to shrink-wrap people’s mind and smother real thought , and then as ceremonial shrouds to bury their willing dead (p-242 war is peace)

The victims of a helpless, not so powerful nations suffer and the people of the powerful country celebrate. There is an “escalation of mass hysteria” in such countries. How unfortunate! Yet all the super powers keep proclaiming to the world. “We are peace lovers, we’re a peaceful people”. Terror and brutality should never be given a free hand. If they are let free then there won’t be a safe place on the earth. It is high time that we give spare some time for such subjects as war and peace and also think of the consequences of war before it is late. As Roy rightly says ,”There is no easy way of spiraling morass of terror and brutality that confronts the world today. It is now time for the human race to hold wisdom, to delve into its wells of collective wisdom, both ancient and modern.”(Pg 243AIJ)Instead of only making tall talks we should make concrete programs to highlight the

consequences of a war. By way of concluding the essay Roy asks, “Have we forfeited our right to dream?” Will we ever be able to re-imagine beauty? Will it be possible ever again to watch the slow amazed blink of a new-born gecko in the sun, or whisper back to the marmot who has just whispered in your ear—without thinking of the world Trade Center and Afghanistan?”(pg 261 war is Peace – AIJ)

The essay was written against the backdrop of a very conflicting situation in Afghanistan, the attack on WTO and a war like situation there. Roy has given us her opinion that a war is a war and no efforts of peace would ever compensate or would be enough to compensate for the massive destruction after a war. Provocations for war from any nation are enough ignitions for a war. They must be doused before it is late. If all are children of the superior strength then all have a right to live. That right should not be snatched away by others that’s all. That’s the minimum expectation from the citizens of planet Earth for citizens of planet Earth.

In yet other of her essay War Talk in her collection, The Algebra of Infinite Justice, Roy laments the fact that war is discussed as a family board game. She express her concerns as to how would life go on normally if there is a war.

“If nuclear weapons exist then nuclear war is a real possibility” (p-297 War Talk) She further adds, “But where shall we go?” Is it possible to go out and buy another life because this one’s not panning out? If I go away and everything and everyone-every friend, every tree, every home, every dog, squirrel and bird that I have known and loved –is incinerated, how shall I live on? Whom shall I love? And who will love me back? Which society will welcome me and allow me to be the hooligan that I am here, at home?” (p-298 War Talk. AIJ)

This is very true, if we are hell bent on destroying everything of others the action will have a boomerang effect with the same speed it, will come back on the sender. So, one must be careful! Vested interests must be dissolved before they start taking shapes and proportion. By way of concluding the essay Roy writes, it’s not just the one million soldiers on the border who are living on hair trigger alert. It’s all of us. That’s what nuclear bombs do. Whether they’re used or not, they violate everything that is humane. They alter the meaning of life itself (p-303, War Talk AIJ)

As Murari Prasad Observes:

“Sure enough both her fiction and non-fiction resonate with her concern for the marginal



and vulnerable sections of the global community” Roy has more valid questions, “Why do we tolerate them? Why do we tolerate the men who use nuclear weapons to black mail the entire human race?” (p-303 War Talk – AIJ, June 2002)

Roy laments the fact that violence is treated by all, discussed by all as if it is a child’s play. People from all walks of life-film industry, corporate sector ,governments, media. “Lavish their time attention, funds technology, research and admiration on war and terror. Violence has been deified. The message this sends is disturbing and dangerous: if you seek to air a public grievance, violence is more effective than non-violence. (p-323, Public power in the age of empire – OPGE)

Since this is the mentality, by training and practice we have acclimatized ourselves to violence, combat, conflict. There is no reason therefore to wonder that we are used to it. Smallest provocation is enough. In fact, such people, authorities wait for provocation and fan to flame for total destruction and annihilation. After all they also need the air to become warm first and then hot. They wish that their weapons should be cleared. There should be a stock clearance. If the stock remains piled up for a long time, shopkeepers have to give them at a low price by calling it a sale. So also, if weapons remain unused for a long time they may become bad. So wait for an occasion and use them – let the war go on. Some thrive on war some die due of war.

Again in voicing her concern over the difficulty in maintaining democracy, Roy The battle to reclaim democracy is going to be a difficult one. Our freedoms were not granted to us by any governments. They were wrested from them by us. And once we surrender them, the battle to retrieve them is called a revolution. It is a battle that must range across continents and countries.”(Pg168 Instant mix imperial democracy OPGE)

Thus, against the backdrop of incidents of war like situations, toppling of governments etc., it is pertinent to note what Roy has said on the subject. If it is difficult to become democratic, it is equally difficult to continue to stay democratic.

As Natasha Walter has rightly said “Although she has often been patronized as a novelist who has stayed into areas that are too complex for her readable style, Roy is excellent at putting across the rational arguments and the webs of the facts that are necessary to backup her opinions.

It must be accepted that now in the present, against the backdrop of war and was like situations at many places on our planet Earth, it is urgent, more than ever that we dig the grave for conflicts and combats.

As Arundhati Roy says about herself, “The theme of much of what I write, fiction as well as non-fiction, is the relationship between power and powerlessness and the endless, circular conflict they’re engaged.”

By way of conclusion it can be said that Roy’s views on war and democracy are very pertinent and relevant in the present situation. Her views have a global reach. They are to be understood and followed to prevent war irrespective of time and place. They are as relevant today as they were then and will continue to be relevant in future if there is to be what is called and what is understood as REAL PEACE.

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