

Arundhati Roy's Approach to Humanity and Neoliberalism in *The Shape of the Beast*

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Abstract

*The article deals with some of the significant issues of contemporary world addressed by Arundhati Roy in her book **The Shape of the Beast**. It also contains some of her interviews taken by different journalists. In this book the author expressed her views regarding human rights, social inequity, global terrorism and some remarkable political phenomena of current and previous times with references to India as well as to some other countries. On top of all these points, she lays a substantial amount of stress on the neoliberal tools with which the prosperous states repress the less developed nations of the world. Neoliberalism has been envisioned by Arundhati Roy as a powerful ploy by means of which the western world has been reaping undue benefits from the impoverished and underprivileged masses belonging to the rest of the globe. Her writings boldly castigate the pranks and deceptiveness of the ruling hierarchy of the world while her attitude towards the downtrodden class of people is deeply corrosive and compassionate. She glances ahead for a peaceful and classless world where people will be judged only on the basis of humanity, not in terms of their gender, caste or religion.*

The readers across the world first fell in love with Arundhati Roy's rhetoric when they read her masterpiece *The God of Small Things* published several years ago. *The God of Small Things* is a fascinating novel that won the Booker Prize in 1997. Later on some other wonderful books by Arundhati Roy were published such as *Listening to Grasshoppers* and *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* and the readers loved these two books as well for the strong messages the author conveyed through her intrepid, straightforward and whetted words about politics, class conflict and human rights. *The Shape of the Beast* is a monumental blend of the author's attitude towards global politics, terrorism, women rights, social issues such as Indian caste system and literature. Her words are just as striking as ever. In her interviews she harshly slated the US wars on Iraq and Afghanistan and she expressed her views about Indo-Pak relations too. She was asked a question about her reactions to the people who criticize her statements. Her answer was "I wear that criticism as a badge of honour" (7). Arundhati Roy's nonconformist standpoint reminds us, in some cases, of Ralph Waldo Emerson, who was a leading figure in the American Age of Enlightenment and who is still remembered for his extremely individualistic and unprecedented thoughts about idealistic values and social equity expressed through his essays. While answering a question she revealed that she had received proposals from a few directors to turn her novel *The God of Small Things* into a movie. But she did not accord her consent to such offers. In her words, "I don't think cinema has to be the last stop for literature, for novels". (22) She was so much enamoured with the characters she illustrated in that novel that she commented, "I couldn't bear the idea of seeing actors play Estha, Rahel, Velutha, Ammu, Chacko.....it would kill me. I love them too much. I always will". (23)

Her words about women's emancipation are highly evocative and remarkable, "Don't sleep with a man until you're financially independent" (34). In a male-dominated world, women's ability to stand on their own feet is indispensable, so asserts Arundhati Roy.

In *The Shape of the Beast* the neoliberal methods with which some global institutions are exploiting the poor countries are termed by Arundhati Roy as 'colonization of knowledge' (37). She said to an interviewer, "The power of the World Bank is not only its money, but its ability to accumulate and manipulate knowledge. It probably employs more PhDs than any

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university in the world. It funds studies that suit its purpose. Sitting in Washington or Geneva in the offices of the World Bank or the WTO, the bureaucrats have the power to decide the fate of millions.....it's a pitfall filled with lies, brutality and injustice" (38). With highly qualified economists and policymakers, the World Bank is in fact exercising a special form of intellectual imperialism, a neoimperial ploy sweetened with financial baits. And when the third world states swallow those baits, the probable consequences are unfolded through the following expressions of Arundhati Roy. "We are tying ourselves into an intricate economic and strategic web. We're in the belly of the beast. Once you're there, you eat predigested pap. You do what you're told, buy what you're sold" (183). And if any country disobeys such western strategies, the consequences may be even military interventions. So the colonial days that ended several decades ago have been retrieved under cover of financial agencies patronized by the west. And the west is led by the United States, "monarch of the new unipolar world"(9) as remarked by Arundhati Roy in *Listening to Grasshoppers*.

While talking about the US war on terror in *The Shape of the Beast*, Arundhati Roy commented that, by bombing Iraq and Afghanistan, the US and its allies have rather empowered terrorism instead of eliminating it. Terrorists are now virtual celebrities, often hitting the headlines of top news agencies. Even they have the power to destabilize a country or to jeopardize a country's government. In the author's words, "So, in effect, terrorists now have the power to ignite war. They almost have the status of heads of state. And that has enhanced the effectiveness and romance of terrorism" (64). In the same context she further added, "The US government's response to September 11 has privileged terrorism. It has given it a huge impetus and made it look like terrorism is the only effective way to be heard" (64). In other words, terrorism has been idealized by the war on terror triggered off by the US and its allies.

Arundhati Roy's envisionment of Indo-Pak tussle over Kashmir is also quite different from the opinions we hear from most of the political analysts. In her view India and Pakistan are so deeply inimical to each other that they want to keep the dispute over Kashmir alive in order to exercise reciprocal antagonism for all the days to come and to keep up an ultra-nationalistic zeal among their citizens. She said, "Kashmir is the rabbit that the governments of both India and Pakistan pull out of their hats whenever they're in trouble. They don't want to resolve the conflict. For them, Kashmir is not a problem, it's a solution" (86). This comment from Arundhati Roy about the long-standing Kashmir issue seems really astounding and it makes us think twice about the way we look into the blazing dispute. Political leaders of both India and Pakistan should come up with earnest and objective intentions to end this conflict, at least to save the lives of innocent Kashmiris, that's what Arundhati Roy implores in *The Shape of the Beast*.

In *The Shape of the Beast* Arundhati Roy lays a great deal of emphasis on the participation of the general masses in the process of implementing the true spirit of democracy in the South Asian countries including India. In *Listening to Grasshoppers* she wrote, "Right now we are sipping from a poisoned chalice—a flawed democracy laced with religious fascism" (4). However, she suggests a remedy to this political ailment of India in *The Shape of the Beast*: "The point is that we have to rescue democracy by being troublesome, by asking questions, by making a noise" (93). She adds, people will have to be far more conscious about their democratic rights. When their democratic rights are about to be snatched away, they should not play possum. They must react vehemently to make the ruling authority realize that democracy is not all about going to power and clinching to the throne for certain tenures; rather the people who elect leaders and send them to power are also equally important.

Arundhati Roy showed her worries about the communal riots that intermittently broke out in India. In her view, communal clashes in India as well as in other South Asian countries are orchestrated in a cool-blooded manner to serve heinous political purposes. In *Listening to Grasshoppers* her reaction to the communal violence that splattered blood all over Gujarat in

February 2002 is very melancholic and remonstrative at the same time (20). She profoundly mourns through her words for the innocent people who got slaughtered in that communal carnage. According to her, communalism is a blazing stigma in the South Asian countries where some immoral politicians generate communal sentiments in the minds of common citizens through misinterpretation of religious doctrines. She strongly feels that a truly democratic government does not capitalize on riots between the devotees of two religions to gain political momentum. Religious values should never be a part of filthy political games.

In *The Shape of the Beast* Arundhati Roy underscores a vital point about the misrepresentation of Indian society through Bollywood films. In this regard, she once said to a journalist that, "You're not showing India in a proper light"(114). She spoke of the subhuman condition of Indian Hindus who belong to lower castes, known as 'Dalits'. Dalits are a clan of socially unrecognized people and they have no access to the socio-economic opportunities enjoyed by other Indians belonging to the upper class. Arundhati Roy says in this book, "The treatment of Dalits in India is by no means any less grotesque than the treatment of women by the Taliban" (181). This comment from Arundhati Roy about the true plight of lower-caste Hindus in India shocks us as it is compared to the indignity Afghan women are facing in areas controlled by the fanatic Muslims. Arundhati Roy actually echoes an identical resonance expressed in Mulk Raj Anand's famous novel *Untouchable* in which the novelist sketched the deprivation and ignominy that the lower-caste Hindus have always suffered in India, since the colonial period till today.

The unending bloodshed and civil wars in different parts of the world have been analysed by Arundhati Roy in *The Shape of the Beast* in the following way: "War is also an economic necessity now. A significant section of American economy depends on the sale of weapons. There has to be a turnover. You can't have cruise missiles lying around on the factory floor. The economies of Europe and the United States depend on the sale and manufacture of weapons. This is a huge imperative to go to war" (124). The leading weapon-mongers of the west make an enormous amount of profit by selling guns and ammunitions to countries at war. So, if a war stops, a very lucrative profit-generating source closes down too. Therefore, wars, in the current world, are not kicked off to be halted. So, selling weapons to war-ravaged countries is a stupendous source of revenue to keep on fuelling the neocolonial stratagems of the western powers. This is how she shows the real picture of these countries in *The Shape of the Beast*.

As found in *The Shape of the Beast*, neoimperialism has another instrument—which is 'language'. Arundhati Roy says, in her point blank words, "And then, of course, even language has been co-opted. If you say 'democracy', actually it means neoliberalism. If you say 'reforms', it actually means repression. Everything has been turned into something else. So, we also have to reclaim language now" (156). In connection with these words from Arundhati Roy, we can recall a language game played by America during the Vietnam War. While Vietnamese villages were being bombed by the US forces, thousands of people were getting killed. Thousands of people were running away to Vietnamese cities to save themselves. Some American political experts of that time called it a process of 'urbanization', as quoted in *The Shape of the Beast* (160). That was undoubtedly a ruthless piece of black humour and an inhuman way to downplay the losses of lives of the helpless Vietnamese civilians during the Vietnam War.

Even the services that some western organizations provide to the poverty-stricken people of the oriental world have been viewed by Arundhati Roy as a neoimperial prank to further aggravate the condition of the emaciated masses of underdeveloped countries. Let us have a glance over the following sentence from *The Shape of the Beast*, "When you hear the words 'humanitarian aid', it's advisable to look around for induced starvation" (160). The western powers are always on their toes to put less developed nations into trouble. Even the cooperative measures they extend to the third-world states should not be naively taken for granted. The western states do not want the poor countries to become self-sufficient because the western leaders and policymakers always carry a hidden plot under their sleeves to retain their supremacy over the rest of the world. Western financial aids and other apparently benign services are never rendered to the destitute masses of less advanced countries without an ulterior motive, that is what Arundhati Roy stresses through the above sentence.

Non-westerners are often found suspicious about western pledges and diplomatic efforts because of the hypocrisy and pretensions that lie beneath most of the western policies. The nature of western policies can be understood from the following sentence of Samuel P. Huntington's famous book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*: "Democracy is promoted but not if it brings Islamic fundamentalists to power; nonproliferation is preached for Iran and Iraq but not for Israel" (184). This exposes the duplicity of the western powers who approve all the malpractices done by their allies but condemns and censors those nations which do not toe the line of the big powers like America or the European Union. The notion is similar to what Arundhati Roy expresses in *The Shape of the Beast*.

To find a way out of the labyrinth of the western form of neoimperialism, people of the previously colonized countries will have to thwart the return of colonial exasperation not just on economic or educational grounds, but on the psychological front too. The phantom of the colonial past still haunts the thoughts of numberless people worldwide. In this connection we can recall Ngugi Wa Thiongo's booklet *Decolonizing the Mind* in which he places much

importance on the indispensability of rising above the virtual shadow of colonialism that still sticks to our mindsets. To paraphrase some of his words, psychological decolonization does not exactly endorse the idea of rejecting the knowledge we gather from the western world. Rather most of our concentration should be dedicated to the task of preserving the fast evaporating heritage of our own lingual and cultural treasures (9).

While writing about cultural expansion of the west across the rest of the world, which is one of the most fatal weapons of neoimperialism, another well-known writer and orientalist Edward Said looks back on the driving forces that prompted the colonized people to revolt against their colonial rulers. He has written in his book *Culture and Imperialism* that, "Most important, the grand narratives of emancipation and enlightenment mobilized people in the colonial world to rise up and throw off imperial subjection" (13). So, the watchwords of independence and egalitarianism propagated by the western philosophers, poets and ideologues during the 18th and the 19th centuries bounced back on to the western colonists as their ideals ignited a spirit of freedom among the masses they had ruled for centuries. In the same way, the gimmicks exercised by the western big guns in the present world have all chances like the past to be slapped back on to their own faces as history repeats itself, according to the historic evidence found in Edward Said's book. If we quote a few words from Samuel P. Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (78), "Modernization, in short does not necessarily mean westernization.....in fundamental ways, the world is becoming more modern and less western" we can understand that despite the fact that Samuel P. Huntington was an American author, he added a note of optimism about the oriental nations in his book. A lot of non-western countries have mastered the art of curtailing dependence on western help, thanks to the industrial boom currently sweeping through some eastern countries, particularly China. Samuel P. Huntington predicted in his book that, "If at some point in the distant future China displaces the west as the dominant civilization in the world, English will give way to Mandarin as the world's lingua franca" (63). This prognosis from Samuel P. Huntington poses a grim threat to the continuation of the neoimperial gambits currently being spearheaded by the west. Wrapping up the world in a neoimperial frame may not be at all a velvety intrigue to materialize. As the world progresses, so does modernization and this strengthens the cultures of the oriental societies and "reduces the relative power of the west", according to Huntington (78). So, neoimperialism may not prevail as a perpetual truncheon to be brandished over the heads of the non-western nations.

To come back to *The Shape of the Beast* we can conclude that it is much more than just a book. It is an almanac of the true geo-political scenario of the planet. It is a grim, pragmatic and moving portrait depicted with a dexterous and prolific author's powerful and emboldened words that pull off the fraudulent masks of the imperialists and their sidekicks that rule the less wealthy regions of the globe.

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