

Reimagining the Post-COVID 19 World: A Critique of Arundhati Roy's *Azadi . Freedom. Fascism. Fiction*

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Abstract

Arundhati Roy's *Azadi . Freedom. Fascism. Fiction*. (2020) is a clarion call to the world at large and India in particular to break the shackles of obsolescence, and reimagine a new and improved world. This wakeup call has been prompted by the pandemic which has brought the entire globe down on its knees. It has forced humankind to question the values that modern societies have been built on – all that they have chosen to venerate and those they have derided. COVID-19 has ridiculed borders: geographical, political, economic and cultural. The pandemic for Roy is a “portal, a gateway between one world and the next” (214). This anthology consists of 9 essays/ lectures written between 2018-2020. They are all linked together as they yield insights into how the world should be recreated. This paper attempts to critically assess the diverse ways in which Roy seeks to reinvent the world post -pandemic.

1. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is a fictionalized representation of the new reimagined India.

‘Azadi’ (freedom) to Roy is synonymous with her second novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. This is because the novel gives her the freedom to be as complex as she wants, to oscillate between diverse spaces, languages and time. In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Roy recreates Indian heterogeneity and diversity. She creates a world that proudly proclaims Indian heterogeneity and scoffs at the concept of ‘One nation, one religion, one

language'. The novel unites characters from across the nation: North (Anjum), South (Tillotama S.), East (Biplab Dasgupta) and West (Bombay Silk); characters from different religions: Hindu convert to Islam (Saddam Hussain), Christians (Tillotama S.), Muslims (Anjum) and even people who forsake their caste and creed like Azad Bharitiya. The narrative ropes in transgenders, along with the other two sexes. Roy says that although it has been written in English, this story involving these characters in this *duniya* had to be imagined in several languages only then could it have been feasible. "It is a story that emerges out of an ocean of languages, in which a teeming ecosystem of living creatures swim around ... some friendly with each other, some openly hostile, and some outright carnivorous" (14). Roy rightly presents India as a land of differences and it is in the accommodation of these differences that her strength lies.

Again, although the novel is backgrounded against the turbulent political ambience of the nation: Kashmir conflict, rising Hindutva, Maoist struggles and the Dalit assertion (403), it ends on a note of optimism. It provides a ray of hope to the nation in the form of Jeebeen the Second. She is a child discovered at Jantar Mantar where people from across the nation have gathered "to fight for a better world in this democracy zoo" (132). She is raised at Jannat Guest House, the graveyard where caste, class, creed, colour and sex differences are of little significance. In fact, the needy, the homeless and injured animals are given shelter in this guest house. At school the students are taught Science, English, Mathematics and Computers and in return they teach their tutors Urdu and "something of the art of happiness" (399). Unlike in the real world where there are horrors of war and subversions of secularism and democracy, in Miss Jeebeen the Second's world there is peace and happiness. Moreover, she is raised by the *hijra* protagonist Anjum, whose adopted kid Zainab is both professionally adept and also a humane young lady.

2. English is the language of the future.

In *Azadi* Roy says that the future can only be reimagined with the English language. English is the language of the future and therefore writing and speaking in English cannot be considered a way of paying obeisance to the British Empire. On the contrary, it is a pragmatic response to the situation. As English opens doors for intellectual, professional, and social opportunities, Roy feels there is an imperative need to master it. Roy also endorses the views of Dalit activists that the denial of quality English education to the underprivileged is a culmination of the Brahmin tradition of denying the subaltern the right to pursue knowledge. Roy supports the Dalit scholar, Chandra Bhan Prasad for understanding the importance of English and building a temple in the village to the Dalit goddess of English. “We will use English to rise up the ladder and become free forever” (*Azadi* 12). In order to buttress her argument, Roy also cites the example of Dr B. R. Ambedkar’s classic denunciation of the Hindu caste system in English - *Annihilation of Caste*. Roy feels that had it been given expression in another language, it would have been elbowed out of the mainstream. Roy also cites her personal example to underscore the importance of English (*Azadi* 19). As a student at her mother’s school, Roy is reprimanded for speaking in the vernacular. As punishment she is made to write “I will speak in English” a thousand times (19). Again, in her second novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Roy even names a character - The Man Who Knew English. Anjum the protagonist of the novel fittingly says knowing “English makes you clever automatically?” (4).

Interestingly, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* has been translated into 48 languages making it accessible to the non-English speaking world too.

3. Kashmir issue should be amicably resolved.

In the article that was first published in *The New York Times* on 15 August 2019, post the abrogation of article 370, Roy says that Kashmir is potentially the most dangerous place on earth. She predicts that it could be the flash point for a future nuclear war. Hence, the Kashmir issue is a global issue, and the entire world should come together to find a solution. “Dear world, find a way,” (*Azadi* 71) she implores. Roy says that the Kashmir issue needs urgent attention as the violence that will emanate from Kashmir will eventually destroy India (103). It will also be the trigger to ignite hostility against Indian Muslims who are already being shoved down the economic and social hierarchy and relegated to the margins. Roy describes Kashmir as the site of unspeakable violence. To prevent this from happening, the conflict in Kashmir has to be resolved. This can only be done if the Kashmiris are taken into consideration. Meanwhile we have to “... wait for Kashmir to speak. And speak it surely will” (*Azadi* 106). Thus peace in India is hinged on the resolution of the Kashmir dispute.

Roy appears to be only reiterating the view of several political activists including the Kashmir born novelist Salman Rushdie that it is in the nation’s interest that the Kashmir issue be defused at the earliest.

So here we are in a newly dangerous world, in which nuclear powers are actually going to war. In such a time, it is essential that the special case status of Kashmir be recognized and used as the basics of the way forward. The Kashmir problem must be defused once and for all, or else, in the unthinkable worst-case scenario, it may end in the nuclear destruction of Paradise itself and of much else besides. (“Kashmir, the Imperiled Paradise”).

4. Fascist regimes should be challenged.

Roy says Fascism should be supplanted by democratic inclusive governments. She lambasts the Narendra Modi - led BJP government for its Hindutva agenda. She accuses it of false-flag attacks, dismantling of educational institutions, falsification of history, bungling of the syllabus, privatization of education, causing of enormous distress in the agricultural

sector, instigation of farmer's suicides, lynching of Muslims, attacks on Dalits and the arrests of several others under the draconian Unlawful Activities Prevention Act. She alleges that the vulnerable are being muted or silenced while all those who are vociferous about the issues plaguing the nation are being imprisoned. Roy does not hesitate to call out former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh for declaring Operation Green Hunt on the penury stricken *Adivasis* who had been fighting corrupt, corporate mining projects in the forests of central India. He had even falsely implicated it as the single largest internal security challenge to the nation when in reality the *Adivasis* are the real victims of the nexus between the politicians and the corporate world. Roy aptly says "Fascism will not be called fascism unless millions have been gassed in concentration camps, the nuclear threat will not be taken seriously until it is too late" (*Azadi* 169).

Roy comes out with a strategy as to how these democratically elected governments should be challenged: citizens who are willing to fight the Establishment.

Who are prepared to put themselves in danger. Who are prepared to tell the truth. Brave journalists can do that, and they have. Brave lawyers can do that, and they have. And artists - beautiful, brilliant, brave writers, poets, musicians, painters and filmmakers can do that. (*Azadi* 2020)

5. Caste system needs to be abolished.

Roy categorically states that a new world cannot be built without the demolition of the age old caste structure. She considers caste as the blight of modern Indian society as even today there are thousands of manual scavengers who carry human excreta on their heads (*Azadi* 119). Once again, she criticizes Mahatma Gandhi for considering caste as the genius of Hindu society (*Azadi* 82). Caste has dominated the fictional works of Roy too. In *The God of Small Things*, Roy focuses on emotional transgressions across caste lines and the intricate relationship between caste and communism. In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* too the

central plot is intertwined with the oppressive caste system. Without getting rid of this discriminatory system Roy says that a new and better India can never be reimagined.

6. Secularism should be championed.

Roy says that the concept of India as a secular nation is hypocritical. Nevertheless, she feels it is the only slice of coherence that makes the idea of India possible. “That hypocrisy was the best thing we had. Without it India will end” (*Azadi* 110).

Considering Indian secularism as hypocritical is absolutely blasphemous to say the least. People from different communities have been living in India in relative harmony. Noted Indian expatriate writer, Salman Rushdie in *Imaginary Homelands* (1991) says “One of the things I like and still like about India is that it is based on a non-sectarian philosophy” (16). He further adds that if “India does not exist, the explanation is to be found in a single word: communalism. The politics of religious hatred” (*Imaginary Homelands* 27). Rushdie considers communalism as a threat to the secular fabric of the state and that secularism is the only mode to “safeguarding the constitutional, civil, human and, yes, religious rights of minority groups” (*Imaginary Homelands* 2). Rushdie credits the nation especially Kashmir with inculcating in him the concept of secularism - a tolerance of all religions in his 2012 memoir *Joseph Anton*. In *Shalimar the Clown* he foregrounds *Kashmiriyat*, the secular culture of Kashmir as the dominant religion of the valley.

In the valley these words [Hindu, Muslim] were merely descriptions not divisions. The frontiers between the words, their hard edges, had grown smudged and blurred. This was how things had to be. This was Kashmir. (57)

In October 2006, in an interview in *The Independent* with Johann Hari on “His life, his work and his religion” Rushdie contrasted the secularism of India with what is going on in the West:

The Muslim population in India is, largely speaking, not radicalised. From the beginning they were always very secular-minded. [Indian Muslims] are a model which could be beneficially studied about how you show a minority community that their interests are best served by secular democracy, and not by religious communal politics. Because if you play the game of religious communal politics, you will always be outnumbered. That was the argument Nehru and Gandhi took to India's religious minorities, and it worked.

(<https://humanism.org.uk/about/our-people/patrons/salman-rushdie/>)

Nevertheless, Rushdie does acknowledge the rapid deterioration of the nation's secular credentials and he gives a reason for this. In *Imaginary homelands* Rushdie says that in Bombay, communal incidents were taking place in areas where Muslims had begun to prosper and move up the economic scale. "Behind the flashpoints like Ayodhya was Hindu resentment of Muslim prosperity" (*Imaginary homelands* 29). While Roy considers Indian secularism as hypocritical, Rushdie rightly attributes it to cut throat capitalism.

7. Climate Change is the world's single largest security challenge and it must be seriously addressed.

Roy says that the future of the planet depends on a healthy environment. She laments that "our forests and rivers are dying, our mountains are eroding, our ice caps are melting" (69). COVID-19 has explicitly established that humans should live in harmony with the natural world. Coexistence is the need of the hour. Environmentalists have predicted that disputes over water could be a reason for future wars. Very significantly, India's dispute over water with Pakistan has also been going on since Independence. Conflicts regarding land too continue to be in the forefront. Post the abrogation of Article 370, industrialists have come forward with business ventures in Ladakh and Kashmir. Roy says that capitalist enterprises such as these will destroy the fragile Himalayan ecology. Roy rightly feels that environmental issues need to be addressed urgently as climate change has severe consequences:

flooding, disease and famine, resulting in migration on an unprecedented scale; drought and crop-failure, leading to intensified competition for resources that are already stretched to the limit.

In fact climate change should top the priority list while reimagining a new world. If we don't have a sustainable planet, will there be a need to reimagine a new world? Scientists have argued that climate change, habitat destruction, and urban pollution have played a significant role in the appearance and spread of COVID-19. The lockdown imposed consequent to COVID-19 has brought great relief in many places from air pollution and the deteriorating environment. Aaron Bernstein, MD, director of the Centre for Climate, Health, and the Global Environment at Harvard, said in a conversation posted on the university's website that man has increased his demands upon nature, so much so that species are being exterminated at a rate unknown since the dinosaurs, along with half of life on earth and went extinct 65 million years ago.

This rapid dismantling of life on earth owes primarily to habitat loss, which occurs mostly from growing crops and raising livestock for people. With fewer places to live and fewer food sources to feed on, animals find food and shelter where people are, and that can lead to disease spread. (<https://www.medpagetoday.com/infectiousdisease/covid19/86325>)

Roy in *Azadi* expresses a global sentiment that it is mandatory for the world to be reinvented and recreated in the post-pandemic scenario. The Pandemic has wreaked havoc worldwide and continues to do so. Hence there is a need to reimagine a new world. The new India should be devoid of caste conflicts, religious fundamentalism and should be environment friendly. These are age old obstacles and they continue to pull the nation backwards.

She says that

There was a time when dissent was India's best export. But now, even as protest swells in the West, our great anti-capitalist, and anti-imperialist movements for social and

environmental justice – the marches against big dams, against the privatization and plunder of our rivers and forests against mass displacement and the alienation of indigenous peoples, homelands – have largely fallen silent. India appears to be silent on all matters of national and international significance. (100)

Roy considers the Pandemic as a hinge moment in human history, as it shows that the entire globe is undeniably interconnected and hence we cannot disengage with each other's problems. She encourages the readers to boldly walk into the new world leaving behind the shackles of chauvinism, animosity and prejudice and bravely reimagine a new world, and fight to ensure that the dream is realized.

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