

Arundhati Roy (1961-)

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Description Indian writer and global public intellectual Arundhati Roy received the Booker Prize for her novel *God of Small Things* (1997), and has since written and spoken extensively on matters of international concern. Raised in a village in Kerala, India, Roy left home for a squatters' camp outside Delhi at the age of sixteen. She studied architecture and wrote screenplays, before the extremely successful publication of *God of Small Things* brought her to international attention. The novel proved controversial in India, earning Roy a lawsuit for its explicit inter-caste love affair. Taking the opportunity provided by her literary acclaim and financial independence to address a world audience, Roy has employed her storytelling expertise to become a powerful voice in the global civil dissent movement.



Arundhati Roy

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Accordingly, her first publication after *God of Small Things* was "The Death of Imagination" (1998), an essay condemning India's nuclear weapons testing. She has spoken at the World Social Forum, protested against large dam construction on the Narmada river with the Narmada Bachao Andolan (an Indian non-governmental organization to which she donated her Booker Prize money), and addressed issues ranging from global dissent, to corporate globalization, to privatization of public resources. "The Greater Common Good" (1999), which exposes the human and environmental costs of large dams, is perhaps her best known essay. More recently, Roy chaired a jury of public intellectuals for the World Tribunal on Iraq (see www.worldtribunal.org/main.htm), a role evolving from her longstanding criticism of the "war on terror," which began with the essay "The Algebra of Infinite Justice" (September 2001).

Both her novel and later works investigate the struggles of "the Small" to cope with vast impersonal forces that "strangle stories." Roy argues the displacement of millions due to large dam construction, the exclusion of the rural Indians from informed debate about nuclear weapons, and the encroaching privatization of the commons weaken people's control over their lives and natural resources, eroding the autonomy of individuals and small communities. Viewing economic globalization as faceless and dehumanizing, she seeks to infuse debates with specificity and personality: "It's very important for me to tell politics like a story, to make it real, to draw a link between a man with his child and what fruit he had in the village he lived in before he was kicked out, and how that relates to Mr. Wolfensohn at the World Bank"

(www.the-south-asian.com/Sept2001/Arundhati_Roy-Interview3.htm).

Critics charge Roy with simplifying and emotionalizing complex issues, and with attacking the very globalization framework that gives her literature a world audience and her opinions a global voice. Deeply skeptical of governments' ability to orchestrate change, Roy promotes the power of a world civil society to bind global decision-makers of developed countries to the consequences of their decisions in the developing world.

Suggested
Reading:

Roy, Arundhati. 1997. *The god of small things*. Toronto: Random House.

Roy, Arundhati. *The greater common good*,
www.narmada.org/gcg/gcg.html (accessed 24 June 2005).

Roy, Arundhati. 2001. *Power politics*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press.

Roy, Arundhati. 2003. *War talk*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press.

Roy, Arundhati. 2004. *An ordinary person's guide to empire*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press.

Simmons, Jon. *Arundhati Roy*,
<http://website.lineone.net/~jon.simmons/roy> (accessed 27 May 2005). The website has links to several essays by Arundhati Roy.