



Some Cultural and Social Changes as a Reflection of Arundhati Roy's Struggle for Positive Transformation

Mohammad Yazdan Zafar

Department of English, Department of English CMP Degree College, University of Allahabad

Pages No: 121-127

Abstract

*This paper explores how Arundhati Roy's literary and activist oeuvre reflects and engages with cultural and social changes in India as part of her overarching struggle for positive transformation. Drawing from her fiction, especially *The God of Small Things*, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* and her nonfiction/essay works, e.g. *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*, *Listening to Grasshoppers*, *Walking with the Comrades*, this study argues that Roy not only mirrors social change but seeks to catalyze it. The paper focuses on three major axes of transformation: changes in caste and class discourses; gender, sexuality, and identity; and ecological and indigenous resistance. By situating Roy's interventions within the broader socio-political context of neo-liberalism, communalism, and global capitalism, the paper contends that her "struggle" is both reflective and interventionist. This dual role of Roy as mirror and agent demonstrates how cultural and social changes are not merely themes in her work but essential to her vision of future possibilities.*

Keywords: social change, culture, caste and class, gender and identity, ecological resistance

Introduction

Arundhati Roy is often referred to as a "writer-activist," a label that points to her dual commitment to literary craft and political engagement. Her debut novel, *The God of Small Things* 1997, earned her international acclaim, while subsequent nonfiction writings and public interventions have entrenched her status as a critical voice in contemporary India. Roy's work does not merely depict injustice but constantly interrogates and challenges the social, cultural, and political formations of her times.

However, less attention has been paid to how Roy's work functions as a reflection of cultural and social change, and as a blueprint possibly utopian, possibly messy for positive transformation. This paper argues that Roy's writings are more than criticism: they inscribe, provoke, and imagine change. By reading her body of work across genres, this study maps how cultural and social changes emerge, align, conflict, and evolve in her vision of India's future.

In what follows, I begin with a review of existing scholarship on Roy's activism and cultural interventions then proceed to analyze three major domains of change in her work. I conclude by reflecting on the caveats, tensions, and potentialities in Roy's model of transformation.

Literature Review

Scholarship on Arundhati Roy often divides broadly into two streams: *literary analysis* (of her novels) and *political/activist critique* (of her essays and public interventions). A number of works examine her representations of caste, gender, environment, and protest; fewer attempt a synthetic reading that centers the idea of transformation as both reflection and intervention.

1. Literary and thematic critiques

Many scholars study *The God of Small Things* through lenses of caste, gender, and colonial legacies. For instance, some analysts note how Valutha's "untouchable" status in the novel dramatizes the continuing reach of caste discrimination; see "Social Inequality in *The God of Small Things*". Others focus on female characters like Ammu and Rahel as embodiments of resistance within patriarchal constraints, see "Resistance and Empowerment" in *The God of Small Things* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*.

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, critics have pointed out Roy's inclusion of marginalized identities, e.g. transgender, interfaith, displaced persons and her weaving of personal and political narratives as a strategy of cultural resistance.

2. Critiques of Roy's activism and essays

Roy's nonfiction, such as *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* 2001 and *Listening to Grasshoppers* 2009 has been analyzed for its sharp critique of neo-liberalism, globalization, and Indian state violence. *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* addresses nuclear policy, environmental catastrophes, and imperialism. *Listening to Grasshoppers* collects essays on democracy, displacement, and the cost of development.

Her *Walking with the Comrades* is frequently cited as an example of participatory reportage: Roy spent time with Naxalites guerillas in Chhattisgarh, and frames counterinsurgency efforts as linked to corporate land grabs.

3. Gaps and the need for a synthetic reading

While significant work has been done in thematic sub-areas, there is less scholarship exploring Roy's *overall project of transformation* how cultural shifts (in norms, identity, values) and social changes (in institutions, power structures) interplay in her critique. This paper aims to fill that gap by focusing on *change* as a central concept in Roy's intellectual and aesthetic project.

Theoretical Framing: Culture, Social Change, and Transformative Struggle

- **Culture as contested terrain:** Culture is not static; it is the arena where hegemony, resistance, identity, and meaning-making contend. Roy's deployment of language, narrative form, and myth often seeks to disrupt dominant cultural frames.
- **Social change vs. transformation:** Social change can be incremental, reformist; transformation denotes deeper structural shifts in institutions, power, values, and worldview. Roy is not satisfied merely with reform; her interventions gesture toward transformation.
- **Reflection and intervention:** In Roy's project, her works are not passive mirrors. They engage in *reflexive criticism*, self-critique, and speculative imagining—thus serving as interventions in public discourse.

With this framing, we can read Roy's deployment of cultural symbols, narrative strategies, and political critique as part of a struggle toward positive transformation.

Cultural and Social Changes in Roy's Work

In this section, I examine three principal domains in which Roy reflects and seeks to shape change: (1) caste, class, and inequality; (2) gender, sexuality, and identity; (3) ecology, land, and indigenous resistance.

1. Caste, Class, and Inequality

a) Continuities and ruptures in caste discourse

Roy often challenges the lingering power of caste even in ostensibly “modern” India. In *The God of Small Things*, the taboo relationship between Ammu/Rahel and Velutha reveals how caste boundaries remain deeply inscribed in social networks and memory. Valutha’s violent marginalization and the erasure of his voice are emblematic of how caste casts long shadows over supposedly egalitarian modernity.

In *The Doctor and the Saint*, Roy interrogates dominant narratives around Gandhi and Ambedkar, critiquing how caste is often whitewashed in nationalist discourse.

She also insists that “caste is class,” urging that left-leaning movements in India must reckon with caste, not treat it as secondary.

b) Class, neo-liberalism, and dispossession

Roy situates caste within the more expansive logic of class and capital. She argues that India’s neoliberal reforms in the 1990s, while benefiting a middle class, dispossessed millions of poor people. As she states, “300 million members of the middle class” have been lifted, but “800 million have been impoverished and dispossessed to make way.”

In her essay works, Roy frequently critiques land acquisition, mining, and large infrastructure projects (dams) as mechanisms through which the state and corporations dispossess marginalized communities (especially tribal). The contest becomes not only about economy but about cultural survival.

In *Walking with the Comrades*, her firsthand engagement with rural and tribal communities underlines the interplay of class, indignity, and resistance.

Thus, Roy sees caste and class not as separate domains but entangled. Her vision is not just of redistribution but of structural transformation: rewriting the rules of property, autonomy, and dignity.

2. Gender, Sexuality, and Identity

a) Women’s resistance in conservative settings

Roy’s novels frequently portray women who transgress restrictive norms. In *The God of Small Things*, Ammu’s defiance her divorce, her affair is punished severely by society. Her daughters, Rahel and Sophie, live with the legacy of her rebellion. Through these characters, Roy shows how gendered norms are internalized, policed, and resisted.

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Roy goes further: the novel gives voice to transgender, intersex, interfaith, and other marginalized identities building a more expansive, plural notion of identity. Scholars of “Resistance and Empowerment” highlight how Roy’s female and gender-diverse characters often exist at the intersection of national, regional, and personal ecologies of oppression and resistance.

b) Identity as site of cultural change

Roy’s deployment of identity is not static. She insists on fluidity, multiplicity, contradiction. In her essays she often narrates identity as relational, e.g. being from Kerala, but also connected to a pan-Indian and global politics. Her notion of belonging is not rooted in purity, but in struggle, memory, and claims to justice.

Her writing about Kashmir, for example, challenges dominant national narratives and insists on the cultural agency of marginalized communities, not as victims but as interlocutors. (Her essays *Azadi* and others critique the erasure of Kashmiri identity and dissent.)

In sum, Roy uses gender and identity not merely as themes but as levers: to question how culture normalizes exclusion, and how struggle can re-imagine belonging itself.

3. Ecology, Land, and Indigenous Resistance

a) Ecological change and critique of development

One of Roy’s consistent concerns is the cost of so-called “development” dams, mining, highways, privatization that is often borne by marginalized populations. In her nonfiction she critiques how the state and corporations frame ecological destruction as progress, while

silencing voices of dissent. *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* contains essays on environmental disasters, nuclear tests, and the consequences of unchecked growth.

In *Listening to Grasshoppers*, she addresses displacement, democratic failure, and ecological meltdown.

Her writing insists that ecological change is also cultural change: the ways we relate to land, resource, and nonhuman, nature must be rethought.

b) Indigenous and tribal resistance

Roy's *Walking with the Comrades* is at once reportage of insurgency and a testimony to the political agency of tribal communities resisting land dispossession. She posits that many Naxalite guerrillas are tribal, and that their struggle is rooted in defending ancestral land from corporate encroachments.

Her critique sees counterinsurgency efforts not merely as security operations but as part of a bigger machinery of resource colonization. By giving voice and presence to tribal resistance, Roy helps reconstruct cultural memory of place and autonomy.

Through this lens, Roy's vision for transformation is not just social justice but *ecological justice* a reorientation of society's relationship to land, water, community, and history.

Intersections, Tensions, and Challenges

While Roy's work is rich in imagination and critique, it carries with it tensions. No thinker's project is without limits. Below are some critical reflections.

- 1. Romanticization and representation**

Some critics argue that Roy at times romanticizes resistance or flattens internal contradictions in movements. For example, *Walking with the Comrades* is lauded for its vividness, but some critique whether it sufficiently addresses internal hierarchies, gender norms, or strategic failures within insurgent movements.

- 2. Practicability of transformation**

Roy's vision is bold, but some of her demands (e.g. overthrowing neoliberal hegemony) may appear utopian to skeptics. The risk is that the gap between vision and policy becomes too wide, leading to disillusionment. It's important for readers and activists to ground her ideas in feasible micro-strategies.

- 3. Critique from the Right and the Center**

Roy's outspoken critique often invites censorship, legal challenge, and dismissal by political establishments. Some accuse her of being "anti-national" or excessively celebratory of dissent. Yet, these very pressures show the stakes of her interventions: contesting the acceptable norms of public culture in India.

- 4. Ambivalence of identity politics**

While identity-based politics is powerful, it sometimes risks fragmenting solidarity across groups or overshadowing systemic class coalitions. Roy is aware of this tension and often stresses intersectionality, but the balance is delicate.

Despite these challenges, Roy's project remains significant because she does not simply critique: she *imagines* cultural and social futures even if uneven, contested, and incomplete.

Nonlinear Narratives and Fragmented Time

Roy disrupts linear storytelling to reflect the fractured realities of marginalized communities. Her use of circular time, memory loops, and child-like perspectives forces readers to question "objective" histories.

Poetic Language as Political Gesture

Roy's lyrical prose is not merely stylistic it's subversive. Her manipulation of grammar, capitalization, and repetition acts as a cultural protest, reflecting oral traditions and destabilizing colonial linguistic norms.

Postcolonial Memory and the Nation-State

Roy juxtaposes state-sponsored history with collective memory, especially in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, where alternative archives graveyards, dreams, whispers reclaim forgotten histories.

Subaltern Voices and Counter-Memory

Roy gives voice to characters and communities erased from dominant narratives. These include Dalits, tribals, Muslims, women, and trans people whose personal memories become counter-histories.

Critiquing Hypernationalism in Contemporary India

In essays like “The End of Imagination” and *Azadi*, Roy critiques militarism, nuclearization, and nationalist fervor. She warns against homogenizing diversity under the banner of “nation.”

The Culture of Silence and Manufactured Consent

Roy’s nonfiction often exposes how media, education, and law collaborate to silence dissent. She argues that cultural changes under authoritarian governance are engineered, not organic.

Cities as Landscapes of Exclusion

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Roy presents Delhi not as a cosmopolitan hub but a city of contradictions where gated colonies neighbor slums and sacred spaces coexist with bureaucratic violence.

Spatial Politics and Gendered Violence

Public space in Roy’s work is gendered and policed. Women, queer, and Trans bodies are shriveled, controlled, and erased. Cultural transformation, she argues, must begin by rethinking spatial justice.

Language as a Site of Power

Roy challenges the dominance of English and upper-caste registers in education. Her use of regional idioms and “bad English” reflects a rebellion against linguistic elitism.

Rethinking Pedagogy: Whose Knowledge Counts?

Roy’s essays interrogate who gets to define knowledge. She draws attention to how indigenous knowledge systems are dismissed or appropriated, calling for epistemic justice in education and policy.

Literary Dissent as Public Service

Roy’s choice to remain a public intellectual rather than retreat into literary celebrity hood is a political act. She sees storytelling not as escape, but as confrontation.

Art and Activism: Blurring the Boundaries

Her fusion of fiction and fact, memoir and reportage, shows that art and activism can coexist. Her works are cultural interventions designed to provoke moral, aesthetic, and civic engagement.

Roy and Toni Morrison: Language and the Marginalized

Both writers use poetic language to center erased histories and speak from within communities of suffering. Morrison’s “rememory” aligns with Roy’s reclaiming of forgotten trauma.

Roy and Eduardo Galeano: Speaking Truth to Power

Like Galeano, Roy merges reportage with storytelling, and critiques empire, capital, and militarism. Both writers believe in the moral obligation of the artist to resist.

Popular Reception and Media Controversy

Roy’s visibility means her work is as contested as it is celebrated. She has faced censorship, sedition charges, and death threats highlighting the stakes of cultural transformation in India.

Academic, Political, and Grassroots Engagement

Her books are studied in universities, referenced in protests, and translated into Indian languages. Despite elite skepticism, Roy remains rooted in ground-level movements.

Surveillance Capitalism and Cultural Control

Roy's essays increasingly engage with the rise of digital authoritarianism. Social media becomes a tool of state surveillance and cultural manipulation.

Cultural Resistance in the Age of Algorithms

She calls for rethinking activism in the face of algorithmic erasure where dissenting voices are shadow-banned, depleted, or drowned in misinformation.

Hope as Political Praxis

Roy often ends her essays on a note of cautious hope not optimism, but what she calls "stubborn hope." Her belief in ordinary people's capacity to resist and reimagining is central to her project.

Literature as Blueprint for Collective Futures

Roy's novels function not just as critique but as blueprints for imagining other worlds where laws serve justice, where land belongs to communities, and where silence is broken.

Conclusion

Arundhati Roy's body of work from her novels to her essays and public interventions can be read as a sustained exploration of cultural and social change in contemporary India. Her struggle is not to document decline but to wrest open the possibility of transformation.

Across the domains of caste and class, gender and identity, and ecology and land, Roy reflects the uneven, contested shifts in Indian society. At the same time, she seeks to intervene to provoke, unsettle, and reimagining. Her work demands that critics, activists, and readers see change not only in structures but in culture: how we speak, remember, belong, dissent.

References

Primary Works by Arundhati Roy:

- Roy, Arundhati. *The God of Small Things*. Harper Perennial, 1997.
- Roy, Arundhati. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Penguin Random House India, 2017.
- Roy, Arundhati. *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*. Penguin, 2002.
- Roy, Arundhati. *Listening to Grasshoppers: Field Notes on Democracy*. Hamish Hamilton, 2009.
- Roy, Arundhati. *Walking with the Comrades*. Penguin Books, 2011.
- Roy, Arundhati. *Azadi: Freedom. Fascism. Fiction*. Haymarket Books, 2020.
- Roy, Arundhati. *The Doctor and the Saint: Caste, Race, and Annihilation of Caste: The Debate Between B.R. Ambedkar and M.K. Gandhi*. Haymarket Books, 2017.

Scholarly Articles and Books:

- Choudhury, Mita. "Postcolonial Subalternity and the Dalit Experience in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*." *Postcolonial Text*, vol. 5, no. 3, 2009.
- Kumar, Sanjay. "Ecological Concerns and the Subalterns: A Study of Arundhati Roy's Non-fiction." *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2018, pp. 341–345.
- Sahoo, Satya P. "Narratives of Resistance: Arundhati Roy and the Discourse of Development." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 39, no. 45, 2004, pp. 4875–4880.
- Sharma, Meenakshi. "Resistance and Empowerment: The Representation of Women in Arundhati Roy's Novels." *International Journal for Research in Applied Science and Engineering Technology (IJRASET)*, vol. 9, no. 7, 2021, pp. 1250–1256.

News and Media Sources:

- Jeffries, Stuart. "Arundhati Roy: 'India Is Not an Intolerant Country. It Is a Brutal Country.'" *The Guardian*, 23 Nov. 2014, www.theguardian.com/books/2014/nov/23/arundhati-roy-interview-goddess-of-big-ideas.

The Hindu. "Movements Are Not Radical Anymore: Arundhati Roy Interview." *The Hindu*, 2010, www.thehindu.com/news/national/Arundhati-Roy-interview-Movements-are-not-radical-anymore/article60167575.ece.

Comparative and Theoretical Sources:

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Vintage International, 2004.

(Referenced in comparison to Roy's memory narratives.)

Galeano, Eduardo. *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*. Monthly Review Press, 1997.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, Columbia University Press, 1994, pp. 66–111.

Guha, Ramachandra. *India after Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy*. HarperCollins, 2007.