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Imagination to Imagine the ‘End of Imagination’: A Critical Study of *The End of Imagination by Arundhati Roy*

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Abstract:

The title of the essay *The End of Imagination* is highly suggestive in the sense that Arundhati Roy has put a pause to her writing fiction. But one finds the title is contradictory in itself, for it requires a great deal of imagination to imagine the ‘end of imagination’. Moreover, most of the things that the essayist conceives in the essay indeed require considerable imagination. She could not keep her mouth shut when India conducted the nuclear test at Pokharan in Rajasthan. In September 1998 her article “The End of Imagination” appeared in *The Nation* as a response to the testing of nuclear weapons in India a few months earlier. The test in fact pierced the heart of India and sowed the seed for the total annihilation of the society. She was committed to challenge the Government of India for having conducting the nuclear test without the consent of the people. In this article I take up for discussion on the issues dealing with injustice, violence and human rights in the essay named *The End of Imagination*.

Keywords: end of Imagination, suggestive, nuclear, annihilation, challenge, injustice, violence, human rights.

Arundhati Roy has spent the last decade in writing non-fictions and championing activism as a social and environmental activist. Roy has brought out her stringent dissatisfaction with the evil-doers through her non-fictional writings. She remains a controversial figure in the eyes of many political leaders and social reformers. Her steps to oppose the injustice have brought such controversy in her career. Let it be the case of Kashmir or the case of Naxalites, may be the case of Srilanka, everywhere her opinions have been taken as opposition. Political parties like Congress or BJP, social organizations like RSS or Bajrang Dal have taken her opinion as ‘Negative Revolution’. Still her movement has not broken down till date. The movement against injustice, violence, terrorism, vengeance and corruption has not surrendered.

According to Roy, a great writer tries to steer clear of the tenets pertaining to responsibility or morality that the society wants to enforce upon her. Nevertheless, one should not misuse this freedom, and should render it purposeful. There is a relationship between the writer and the medium, which functions as a metaphor for the relationship between a Woman and her Man when Roy affirms: “At its best, it’s an exquisite bond between the artist and the medium. At its acceptable end, a sort of sensible cooperation. At its worst it’s a relationship of

disrespect and exploitation" (*The Ladies Have Feeling, so...*134). Being a writer, her medium of protest is the written language. She feels it her onerous responsibility to highlight the injustices inherent in the world social order and also the atrocities inflicted on the natural environment. She has got a burning passion for her country and she is ready to break her idolized self of being a winner of the coveted Booker Prize for fiction. She strongly believes that any sort of Power is to be resisted. Language if used creatively and effectively can evoke the senses of the readers to a great extent.

When she was awarded with the Man Booker Prize, she was labeled a successful 'writer' and her three political essays and one development debate away, she was rechristened a 'writer-activist'. As long as one writes fiction, she is termed a writer; if she turns to nonfiction or express her standpoint on an issue, she is renamed a 'writer-activist'. Just as a woman who remains within the limits of imagination and subjugation is termed a Woman, and one who airs her voice or protests for her rights is termed a "Feminist". She claims to be with this "double-barreled appellation" (*ibid*). But the common thread that connects her fiction and non-fiction is the voice of dissent.

In *The End of Imagination*, Roy made her idea clear:

I am prepared to grovel. To humiliate myself abjectly, because in the circumstances, silence would be indefensible. So those of you who are willing: let's pick our parts, put on these discarded costumes and speak our second-hand lines in this sad second hand play. But let's not forget that the stakes we're playing for are huge. Our fatigue and our shame could mean the end of us. The end of our children and our children's children. Of everything we love. We have to reach within ourselves and find the strength to think. To fight (4).

Roy knows that what she has to say has already been said by the social and humanist thinkers, politicians and by the millions who were killed, impaired and mutilated by the bomb in the Second World War. But as living and thinking human beings, she feels, we must raise our voice and tell the same tale of caution and warning even at the cost of repeating what others have already said.

Her imagination perceives the horror hidden for most of us, and that explains her unusual alarm with which she takes the event. She probably alarmed by the psychological states of India and Pakistan which abound in 'tired, dejected, heartbroken people' (*ibid*) which may in desperation trigger off a war which both are incapable of comprehending the vital dilemma involved. She is deadly against nuclear weapons, which destroy the very elements of nature that she penned in *The End of Imagination*:

If there is a nuclear war, our foes will not be China or America or even each other. Our foe will be earth herself. The very elements - the sky, the air, the land, the wind and water - will all turn against us. Their wrath will be terrible (5).

Moreover, most of the things that the essayist conceives in the essay indeed require considerable imagination. Her visualization of the possibility of a nuclear war, when the enemies will not be China or America; the foe would be Mother Earth herself and her elements.

Arundhati Roy foretells the harmful consequences of nuclear weapons on human beings and ecology in *The End of Imagination*:

Our cities and forests, our fields and villages will burn for days. Rivers will turn to poison. The air will become fire. The wind will spread the flames when everything there is to burn has burned and the fires die, smoke will rise and shut out the sun. The earth will be enveloped in darkness. There will be no day. Only interminable night. Temperatures will drop to far below freezing and nuclear winter will set in. Water will turn into toxic ice. Radioactive fallout will seep through the earth and contaminate groundwater. Most living things, animals and vegetables, fish and fowl, will die. Only rats and cockroaches will breed and multiply and compete with foraging, relict humans for what little food there is (*ibid*).

When these life- giving elements would eventually turn against humanity; how the cities and forests will burn for days on end, rivers will be filled with poison and wind will fuel the fires. She further goes on to envisage how after everything burns, the fire will die and smoke will shut out the whole scene. As the earth gets enveloped in darkness, there will be only nights and no days. When nuclear winter sets in, the water in hydrosphere will turn into toxic ice. Groundwater will get contaminated through radioactive fallout that will seep through the earth and pollute groundwater. The worst ones affected would be the ones still alive, holding on to the cancerous carcasses of their children-burned, bald and ill. All these thoughts, envisaging and anticipating a catastrophic future as a result of nuclear warfare, entail profound insight and imagination on the part of Roy.

When India testing of nuclear weapons in Pokharan, she with ardent passion, charges the Government for having conducted the nuclear test and laments the fact that “my world has died. And I write to mourn its passing (15). The Government of India is keen on building up its nuclear weapons. Roy satirizes the Bhaba Atomic Research Centre’s idea of giving safety measures to tackle the bad effects of nuclear weapons in case of a nuclear war. It advises the people to

take iodine pills . . . remaining indoors, consuming only stored water and food and avoiding milk. Infants should be given powdered milk. People in the danger zone should immediately go to the ground floor and if possible to the basement (5-6).

She also envisages a point when people will be more concerned about piling bombs than about feeding their own bellies. Roy visualizes a stage when nuclear technology may soon find

its way to the market, and it may be easily accessible to anybody - businessmen, terrorists, and even the occasional rich writer, like herself. She states:

“our planet will bristle with beautiful missiles and that there will be a new world order where there will be the dictatorship of the pro-nuke elite. She imagines that sadism will be the dominant emotion as people will find joy in threatening each other. She compares it to bungee-jumping where one cannot rely on the bungee cord, or to playing Russian roulette all day long. She goes on to say that an additional perk of the whole catastrophic situation will be “the thrill of Not Knowing What to Believe” (8).

She further fears that people will reach a time when “it is not dying that we must fear, but living” (9). When the nuclear test was conducted by the Government of India the supporters of the then Government wanted to “distribute radioactive sand from the Pokhran desert as *prasad* all across the country (7). Roy calls it “a cancer yatra” to eliminate humanity from the world. The news paper gave wide publicity to the nuclear test and many of the papers praised the Government for having conducted the nuclear test “Explosion of Self-esteem”, “Road to Resurgence” and “A Moment of Pride” (13).

Far from the ‘end of imagination’, she lingers on thoughts about her own ephemeral fame and how it would rule over her life, written poetic prose nothing short of the imaginative. She quips: “Club me to death with its good manners and hygiene” (11). She sees in her mind’s eye, herself growing old and irresponsible, eating mangoes in the moonlight. She also pictures herself ‘experimenting’, writing some worst sellers just to see what it would be like.

The Shiv Sena supremo Mr. Bal Thackery, a noted right wing senior politician reacted to the nuclear test by stating that “we have proved that we are not eunuchs anymore” (13). The serious issues were treated with much ease and pride therefore; Roy was forced to come to a contention that “everybody loves the bomb. (Therefore the bomb is good) (27).

She sarcastically points out certain statements made by the then ministers that leave one wondering whether they are referring to the nuclear tests or the Viagra that had been vying with the former for the first place in the headlines of newspapers around the same time. The then Defence Minister had declared in response to Pakistan’s nuclear tests: “We have superior strength and potency” (13). Again, in the context of competing with Pakistan in amassing nuclear weapons, the Indian politicians are said to have compared the nuclear tests to litmus tests of patriotism: ‘these are not nuclear tests; they are nationalism tests’ (*ibid*).

Both India and Pakistan build up nuclear weapons as they believe in the Theory of Nuclear Deterrence. Each and every country in the world is busy in building of its nuclear weapons for the protection and the well being of its territory. But all their aspirations go in vain when one country attacks the other:

Though we are separate countries, we share skies, we share winds, we share . Where radioactive fallout will land on any given day depend on the direction of the wind and rain. Lahore and Amritsar are thirty miles apart. If we bomb Lahore, Punjab will burn. If we bomb Karachi, then Gujarat and Rajasthan, perhaps in Bombay, will burn. Any nuclear war with Pakistan will be a war against ourselves (17).

We cannot pointing nuclear missiles at Pakistan as the two countries share contagious borders we share the same air, water and sky and therefore any nuclear war with Pakistan will be a war against ourselves.

Roy prophesies that there will come a time when ordinary man can afford to buy weapons as the prices fall and s/he can use it against his/her enemies:

When nuclear technology goes on the market, when it goes truly competitive and prices fall, not just governments, but anybody who can afford it, can have their own private arsenal-businessmen terrorists, perhaps even the occasional rich writer (like myself) (8).

The Government of India cheated the people without making them aware of the harmful consequences of nuclear weapons. The Government had enough time and money to build up arms and ammunitions for safeguarding its territory. At the same time, the Government neglects the poor people's battle for survival. In the name of developments, the Government of India has denied justice to its people especially the poor Adivasis and tribal people. They live in forests, eat fruits, roots and leaves and make their own medicine from herbal plants. Though special constitutional Rights have been guaranteed to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, the existence of these people is really in trouble:

Tribal people don't really matter. Their stories, their customs, their deities are dispensable. They must learn to sacrifice these things for the Greater Common Good of the Nation (that has snatched from them everything they ever had) (25).

India is a country known for its ancient culture and heritage from the time immemorial. The people in the country protest against the Western "music, their food, their clothes, their cinema and their literature" (24). But the same people celebrate nuclear bombs and condemn "Western culture by emptying crates of Coke and Pepsi into the public drains" (*ibid*). People reject Coke and Pepsi as they belong to the Western culture and they accept nuclear bombs as if they belonged to "an old Indian tradition" (*ibid*). India wants to project to the world communities that the country is in its way of progress, trying to be self-sufficient and self-reliant. But the country has to go a long way for the eradication of poverty.

In *The End of Imagination*, Roy has brought out the perilous effects of nuclear weapons and the drastic extent to which they can lead the people into trouble. Bombs can't satisfy the

thirst and hunger of the poor. They can be used only for destructive purposes and finally they lead to the total annihilation of the society. Roy incites the people to act against the policies of the Government especially the nuclear proliferation policy. Roy corrects the mistaken notion that the nuclear weapons are harmful only when they are used. In *The End of Imagination*, Roy speaks about the bad influence of nuclear weapons on the lives of the people:

It is such supreme folly to believe that nuclear weapons are deadly only if they're used. The fact that they exist at all, their very presence in our lives, will wreck more havoc than we can begin to fathom. Nuclear weapons pervade our thinking. Control our behaviour. Administer our societies. Inform our dreams. They bury themselves like meat hooks deep in the base of our dreams. They are purveyors of madness. They are the ultimate colonizer. Whiter than any white man that ever lived. The very heart of whiteness (9).

Roy projects herself as an ambassador of peace with justice through her non-fictional writings. She criticized both the Congress Party and the BJP for their keen enthusiasm in pursuing nuclear weapons. The Government taught its people how to wage immortal war against the very elements of nature. Weapons of mass destruction aim at the culmination of human society. Atom bombs have no feeling; they don't have any space and time:

Making bombs will only destroy us. It doesn't matter whether we use them or not. They will destroy us either way. India's nuclear bomb is the final act of betrayal by a ruling class that has failed its people (27).

In her zeal she poses basic questions about the existence of Indian identity: "Is Indian Indian" (20). Her arguments may look reasonable but on objective observation we feel that on such vital issues she should have better remained discreet. If there is no Indianess in India, why should she be so full of regret about the values which India stood for? We feel difficulty in supporting her arguments about India without any identity:

The people who have a vital stake...in India having a single, lucid, cohesive national identity are the politicians...because ...their career goal is...to become that identity.... If there isn't one, they have to manufacture one and persuade people to vote for it.... The more morally bankrupt the politicians, the cruder the ideas of what that identity should be (21).

Roy sees the hypocrisy in the BJP youth celebrating India's nuclear bomb and simultaneously "condemning Western Culture" by emptying crates of Coke and Pepsi into public drains. Her whole punch, present earlier in the essay, seems to have lost its strength when she refers to such bizarre ideas. She dwells on the issue of whether India is a Hindu state or not because much before the Hindus there lived *Adivasis* and that a lot of foreign elements have entered to leave anything indigenously Indian or Hindu. In short her final appeal and message is clearly audible in her assertion:

The nuclear bomb is the most anti-democratic, anti-national, anti-human, outright evil thing that man has ever made. If you are religious...this bomb is Man's challenge to God....This world of ours is 4,600 million years old. It could end in an afternoon (29).

The essay is the anguished cry of a professed humanist. Her opinion and views may appear rather inconsiderate as Roy laments as if the world were lost in her lines:

If protesting against having a nuclear bomb implanted in my brain as anti-Hindu and anti-national, then I secede. I hereby declare myself an independent, mobile republic. I am a citizen of the earth. I own no territory. I have no flag... (15).

Kapadia sums up the stunning achievement of Roy's *The End of Imagination* in the following words:

The article is an ideological statement, lucidly presented with an abundance of parody, iron and at times biting sarcasm. It is a vehement protest at the nuclear tests carried out at Pokhran in May 1998 and the subsequent attempt by BJP Government to politicize the issue and present it as a national cause. The fearlessness of the author considered an icon, a successes story of the middle classes and a symbol of India's progress, in championing an anti-establishment cause which she fervently believes irrespective of the consequences or her status is praise worthy (406).

There is no doubt that the issues Roy raises are vital and the very planet is at stake. Her views on basic issues are clear, pointed and straight and she mines no words in expressing them. Her writings very often remind us the writings of Virginia Woolf.

Virginia Woolf once remarked in her essay *Professions for Women*, that 'any woman who resolves to write is committed to two responsibilities "killing the Angel in the house in her and telling the truth about her own experience as a body." Her words are charged with the meaning that a woman doesn't simply write to please the readers. There are deeper concerns than entertainment.

Apart from being one of the greatest writers of all time, she comes forward to front to support for the cause. We are greatly indebted to her for having taught us to look at the urgent issues in different and deeper ways than was ever attempted before.

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