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On Gulf of Tonkin Anniversary: Top Ten Vietnam

By ANONYMOUS (NOT VERIFIED) on September 29, 2011

Arundhati Roy

More than a decade after she burst onto the world literary scene with *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy is again working on a novel. She wouldn't say much about it, other than that Kashmir figures in it. She once told me, Fiction is the truest thing there ever was. But she is also drawn to write about politics. *The New York Times* calls her India's most impassioned critic of globalization and American influence. Her latest books include *The Checkbook & the Cruise Missile*, a collection of interviews I did with her, and *An Ordinary Persons Guide to Empire*.

The diminutive Roy is a bundle of energy. She has an insouciant sense of humor but behind it is a brilliant mind and a serious commitment. For Roy, justice and solidarity are not

slogans but lived values.

She created a bit of a stir in India a couple of years ago when she refused to accept the prestigious literary Sahitya Akademi Award in protest against state policies supporting big dams, nuclear weapons, increasing militarization, and neoliberalism. She condemned the government for being prepared to implement them ruthlessly and violently, whatever the cost. Then she added, Even as we call ourselves a democracy, Indian security forces control and administer Kashmir, Manipur, and Nagaland and the numbers of the dead and disappeared continue to mount.



Quietly on the side, she funds documentary films and grassroots organizations. A lot of the royalties from my work I put into a trust, she told me. A few of us, friends, activists, run it. The only money that comes into it is from my writing, because its not about trying to raise funds, its just trying to give it out in solidarity with people who dont know how to write proposals and work the system.

Shes never shirked from confronting power, whether in New Delhi, Washington, or elsewhere. In 2008, she infuriated Turkish nationalists when she went to Istanbul to give a lecture honoring Hrant Dink, the murdered Turkish-Armenian journalist.

Recently, shes been speaking out on Kashmir. In 1947, the British partitioned the subcontinent into India and Pakistan. But the status of Muslim-majority Kashmir remains unsettled. Its currently divided into an Indian portion and a smaller Pakistani segment. Once compared by a Mughal emperor to heaven on earth, today Kashmir is a highly militarized zone with armed troops everywhere. A rebellion against Indian rule erupted in 1989. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers and security forces were sent to crush the uprising. Tens of thousands of Kashmiris have been killed, thousands have been disappeared. Kashmirs towns and villages are dotted with garrisons, checkpoints, roadblocks, barbed wire, and towers. At the Srinagar airport, you feel you are entering a foreign country. Caught between

the rival claims and agendas of India and Pakistan, the wishes and desires of the Kashmiri people, who have their own language, culture, and traditions, have been ignored.

Roy has been to Kashmir many times. And she went back in August and December, kicking up controversy when she accused the Indian Army of ongoing atrocities.

The first time I interviewed Roy for *The Progressive* was in Western Massachusetts on a freezing February day in 2001 in the back seat of a car. This time around, our circumstances were a bit more comfortable. We sat at her kitchen table in her home in New Delhi on New Years Day.

Q: Talk about the terrorist attack on Mumbai. You were hesitant to write about it. Why?

Arundhati Roy: It was a difficult decision, yet it became much harder not to write about it than to write about it, because the elite had cornered the TV channels, and there was this spiraling ugliness, this baying for war. The media made it appear as if this was the first time that such a thing had happened in India, because it was the first time that the golden heart of India, the absolute elite, had been targeted, which raised a lot of very interesting things to write about. What does it mean in this country where it really doesnt matter what happens to poor people, it doesnt matter that well more than 100,000 farmers have killed themselves, it doesnt matter as long as only poor, impoverished soldiers are paying the price to hold down Kashmir? But when your best and most beautiful citizens are paying the price, then what?

Predictably, people twisted it around to say, Oh, she justifies it or, She thinks its OK for rich people to be killed, which is absolutely not what Im saying.

Watching the news, reading the news, it was like this dead silence about the elephants in the room. One of the gunmen actually spoke about Kashmir and about Gujarat [the state where hundreds of Muslims were killed in 2002 in a government-sanctioned pogrom] and Babri Masjid [the mosque destroyed by Hindu chauvinists in 1992]. But it was as if he

hadnt. It was as if those were not the issues at all, and this was just some mad pathology. So that effort to push everything away and say this was a text without a context was something that became dangerous.

I tried not to write about it, but I was literally pushed into it. People on the street would come up to me and say, What are you thinking? What are you saying? They were waiting to know. I think thats because Im not just writing as me. I dont want to claim some unique voice. Actually, outside the mainstream media, if you read what was being written on the Internet and what was being said on the streets, there was an incredible maturity in the response.

I have to say this reluctantly, that even the Indian government was far more mature than the media were. And I am unable to say right now whether they were playing good cop, bad cop, so that while the government sounded sober and responsible, the media was whipping up hysteria.

Interestingly, this democracy has created a situation in which the elites are fused with the state; they see and think like the state. They always want to be ministers or policymakers. They are never citizens who are angry or outraged or protesting. Theyre never at the receiving end of power; they are at the disbursing end of power.

Q: The Mumbai attack led to new laws and the creation of the National Intelligence Agency. Whats the implication for civil liberties?

Roy: This is a very important question. The government and the elites pushed for these so-called terrorist laws, not out of fear of terrorism only, because I think people are aware that we have had these laws in the past. Weve had the Terrorism and Disruptive Activities Act and weve had the Prevention of Terrorism Act. In all these cases, the conviction rate has been 2 percent. It doesnt take a great deal of intelligence to know that when a person has decided to die fighting, they are hardly likely to be concerned with bailable and nonbailable offenses.

What is happening in India right now has to do with the other battle, the battle thats not on

television. The battle of the poor against displacement, the battle of the Maoists, the battle against mining and all that which is actually a far bigger battle. And this is where these laws come into use. Those laws are really for people the government doesn't like. They have to do with giving government the power to criminalize democratic space, to prevent people speaking, people working, people organizing into a kind of mass movement, which is what is going on outside the floodlights in the rest of India.

That is the situation. And that's why I'm saying that this militaristic response is more for us, the citizens in India, than it is for Pakistan or for *Lashkar-e Taiba* [the group accused of the Mumbai attack] or for terrorism. It's more to control us.



Q: How do you address the issue of terrorism? OK, you give the context and background. Yet you have people who seem to have total disdain not only for the lives of others but also for their own lives. How can you reach them? It's as if they're in another zone entirely.

Roy: That is the problem. Those particular individuals have obviously departed to another station and communication links have been cut. So if you try and look at whatever policies you make as some way of stopping terrorism forever, you're bound to fail. The only thing you can do is to look at the conditions in which more and more anger, more and more despair, more and more resentment are being created, and how do you change the chemistry. There are no easy answers to this problem.

Certainly there was no easy answer to 9/11. The fact that the U.S. rebombed Afghanistan into the Stone Age didn't help them. And now to assume that you can bomb Pakistan to sort out the problem is absurd beyond belief. The point is that we are living in a perilous time, and more than anything, you need brains to sort it out. That seems to be a very scarce commodity.

Q: L. K. Advani, India's former deputy prime minister and the leader of its main rightwing

party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and Arnab Goswami, a prominent Indian television anchor, have both attacked you in public.

Roy: We have a TV anchor who is so excited about this unfolding drama in Mumbai, and then he suddenly turns to the camera and says, Arundhati Roy and Prashant Bhushan [a leading defense attorney], we think youre disgusting.

Q: Using the collective we.

Roy: We, yes, like hes the Queen of England. We meaning hes just one of many who are carrying Advanis flag of under no circumstances can you question the brave police and the brave armyat a time when we are among the countries with the highest numbers of custodial deaths in the world, a country that has not ratified the international covenants on torture, an army that has occupied Kashmir.

Q: What did you see when you went to Kashmir?

Roy: Last summer, there was an incredible spontaneous uprising, and there were hundreds of thousands of people on the streets. I can still hear the noise in my head, *Azadi, azadi, azadi*. The fruit sellers were weighing their fruit chanting *Azadi, azadi*. The people on the buses, the children on the streets. It was as if the sky was chanting that.

Q:*Azadi* means freedom.

Roy: *Azadi* means freedom in a very nuanced way, because that in itself is a very contested term in Kashmir. This nonviolent uprising was actually presented to the leaders of the separatist movement by the people. It wasnt that the leaders led the movement, but the people really came and dusted off the mothballs and pulled the leaders out onto the street and presented them with a kind of revolution.

The Indian governments response to that was the harshest curfew that has ever been imposed in Kashmir. The army put up razor wire and steel walls. People were prevented from moving between towns and villages. A lot of Kashmiris were killed. There were more

than half a million soldiers in the Kashmir valley. The army controls the inhalation and the exhalation. For the army to put down the uprising wasn't hard in a military sense. So that was August.

Then there was a big debate about whether to call elections because everyone feared that there would be a complete boycott, which is what the separatists wanted. But to everybody's shock and surprise, there was a huge turnout. Nobody could understand exactly what had happened. Where was that outburst of a desire for freedom that was being expressed in the street? Did it suddenly disappear?

So I went back to Kashmir in late December to understand for myself what it was all about. Of course, the first thing that happened was that the police tailed me and restricted my movements. They're so frightened of anybody who has a point of view different from that of the Indian state.

And while it's true that people did come out and vote, the way I see it is that people realize that they're lying on a bed of nails, and these elections are like a little, thin layer of sponge over the bed of nails, a way of getting by, a way of continuing to live.

What the Indian government has done over and over again is this kind of crisis management, sweep things under the carpet, and then hope that it will go away. Then it resurfaces in a different way, in a different form. What people really want is being thwarted again and again and again. As a citizen of India, I feel uncomfortable with that. And the price of holding down the Kashmir valley—which was being paid mostly by Indian soldiers, who are mostly poor people from India who don't count—was suddenly being paid by the Indian elite in five-star hotels in Bombay. That put a totally different spin on things.

Q: You said in an article in *The Guardian* that India needs *azadi* from Kashmir just as much as if not more than Kashmir needs *Azadi* from India.

Roy: There isn't any possibility of India managing to continue to bulldoze this population in Kashmir. Eventually all that can come out of it is destruction. All that can come out of it is people wanting to take you down with them. If you push them to a stage where there is no

possibility of any access to justice, even if 99 percent of them decide to put their heads down and suffer, 1 percent is enough to destroy life as you knew it.

Q: You make connections between the Mumbai attacks and U.S. foreign policy in South Asia, calling the assault the detritus of two Afghan wars.

Roy: In the corporate media, there is a sort of coy silence about the role of the United States in the subcontinent. The fact is that Pakistan was the crucible in which America conducted its experiment in jihad against the Soviet Union. Pakistan was the recruiting agency for mujahedeen fighters from all over the Middle East, from Chechnya, from Saudi Arabia, from everywhere, to come and fight the Soviets.

It isnt that people were recruited and given Stinger missiles and AK-47s and told to go in to fight. People were indoctrinated. People were brainwashed into going and fighting that desperate war in which more than a million people died. Once youve released these Frankenstein monsters into the world, you cant whistle and hope they will come back like trained mastiffs and say, Yes, sir, did you call?

Q: Youve said that the U.S. never has friends, it only has agents. Now the Indian government and elites are lining up with the Americans, but ultimately you suggest that it will just backfire.

Roy: It will. Does anybody care to study the history of former allies of the United States and what happens to them? The world is full of these examples, whether its Iraq or whether its Pakistan or whether its Chile. The list goes on and on and on. So I dont think anybody should be goo-goo-eyed about how much America loves India.

Q: Today, India is part of a new allianceTel Aviv, New Delhi, Washington.

Roy: I think about the fact that every morning we wake up and have this national pride rammed down our throats when actually there is no pride. There was a time when India stood for something, when it was part of the nonaligned movement, when there was a sort of moral dignity. The more we are told that we should feel national pride, the more you

actually ought to be ashamed, because you know that this country stands for nothing except the self-interest of its elites now.

And this despite the fact that, on the other hand, there are people involved in environmental movements, in displaced peoples protests and agitation. That side of India is alive and thriving and full of fire and dignity. I do feel a great amount of pride in that. This is a country where people are not taking things lying down and people are fighting with huge amounts of imagination. But in the official world, the world of diplomats and the world of power and armies and weapons and governments, we have humiliated ourselves while trying to force people to feel national pride.

Q: I was with a family in Kerala, your home state, when footage was shown of the Iraqi journalist, Muntadar Zaidi, throwing shoes at Bush. The family jumped up and cheered. What was your reaction?

Roy: It was one of the more delightful things that has happened in a long time. It was not just the fact that he threw them but the way the world took it up. Immediately there was a video game. People all over the world threw those same shoes. There were thousands of people in Baghdad with a shoe protest. And I thought here was such a wonderful farewell to this man, so much more wonderful than an assassination attempt or anything like that. So creative. It was like a modern version of the story of The Shoemaker and the Elves. It was a more fitting farewell to that man than one could have come up with in a fiction film. And as a person who enjoys watching and thinking about things politically, it opened up a kind of wonderfully irreverent space.

Q: What was your response to Obamas election?

Roy: The fact that the American people wanted a change, that they wanted something else, meant a lot, because the last time they wanted the same guy back, which was devastating. So this makes me feel better about the American people.

Obama is going to be presiding over perhaps the debacle, the undoing, of the American empire. And that doesnt need to worry the American people, because the Romans are still

around and the Brits are still around, and the Americans will still be around and might be slightly more relaxed. It might be easier to be an American when there isn't an American empire.

David Barsamian is the director of Alternative Radio in Boulder, Colorado. His last interview for The Progressive was with Maude Barlow in December 2008.



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