

Structures of Power and Resistance in the Works of Arundhati Roy

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Abstract: Arundhati Roy's literary and political writings constitute a sustained critique of power in its multiple manifestations, ranging from caste and patriarchy to state violence, nationalism, capitalism, and global imperialism. This research article examines how structures of power operate and how resistance is articulated in Roy's fictional and non-fictional works. Through an analysis of her novels *The God of Small Things* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, alongside selected essays, the study explores Roy's representation of institutionalized power and her commitment to amplifying marginalized and dissenting voices. Drawing upon postcolonial theory, subaltern studies, feminist criticism, and political discourse, the article argues that Roy's writing destabilizes dominant narratives and exposes the moral and human costs of authoritarian systems. Resistance in Roy's works is not always overt or victorious; instead, it often emerges through fragile acts of defiance, memory, storytelling, and survival. By foregrounding those silenced by history and power, Roy transforms literature into a space of ethical intervention and political resistance. The article concludes that Roy's oeuvre represents a powerful fusion of aesthetics and activism, redefining the role of the writer in contemporary society.

Keywords: Power, resistance, postcolonialism, caste, state violence, feminism, dissent.

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Introduction

The question of power—who holds it, how it is exercised, and against whom it operates—lies at the heart of much postcolonial literature. In the Indian context, power is deeply embedded in historical, social, and political structures shaped by colonialism, nationalism, caste hierarchy, patriarchy, and neoliberal capitalism. Few contemporary writers engage with these complexities as relentlessly and provocatively as Arundhati Roy. As both a novelist and a political essayist, Roy has consistently interrogated the mechanisms through which power legitimizes itself and perpetuates inequality, while simultaneously exploring the possibilities and limitations of resistance.

Roy's literary career began with *The God of Small Things*, a novel that exposed the oppressive workings of caste, patriarchy, and social conformity within a seemingly intimate, domestic space. Her later novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, expands this inquiry to a broader national and geopolitical canvas, engaging directly with issues such as state surveillance, militarization, religious nationalism, and the suppression of dissent. Alongside her fiction, Roy's non-fiction essays articulate an uncompromising critique of state power, corporate globalization, and environmental destruction, often positioning her in direct opposition to dominant political ideologies.

This article examines how Roy constructs and critiques structures of power in her works and how resistance is imagined and enacted by individuals and communities located at the margins of society. Rather than viewing power as monolithic, Roy presents

it as layered and pervasive, operating through law, language, tradition, and violence. Resistance, in turn, is shown as complex and ambivalent, manifesting in both overt political struggle and subtle personal acts of refusal. By analyzing Roy's major works through these themes, this study seeks to highlight the ethical and political significance of her writing in an age marked by increasing authoritarianism and social fragmentation.

Conceptualizing Power in Roy's writing

Power in Roy's works is multifaceted and deeply structural. It is not confined to political institutions or state apparatuses alone but permeates everyday life, shaping relationships, identities, and social norms. Roy's writing reveals how power operates through systems that appear natural or inevitable, such as caste hierarchies, gender roles, and nationalist ideologies. These systems function by regulating behavior and defining the boundaries of what is acceptable, often punishing those who transgress them.

One of the most persistent forms of power addressed in Roy's fiction is caste. In *The God of Small Things*, caste operates as an invisible yet omnipotent force that determines social worth and human possibility. The rigid enforcement of caste boundaries reflects a deeply entrenched structure of power that predates colonialism yet continues to shape postcolonial society. Roy portrays caste not merely as a social classification but as a mechanism of exclusion and violence that legitimizes inequality in the name of tradition.

Patriarchy functions alongside caste as another axis of power in Roy's work. Female characters are often subjected to social control, moral judgment, and economic dependence. Their bodies become sites where power is exercised and contested, revealing how gendered oppression intersects with other forms of domination. Roy's depiction of women's experiences exposes the intimate dimensions of power, highlighting how private spaces can reproduce public hierarchies.

State power emerges more explicitly in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, where Roy examines the relationship between the individual and the nation-state. Here, power is institutionalized through laws, military force, and surveillance, particularly in regions marked by political unrest. Roy presents the state as an entity that demands loyalty while simultaneously excluding those who do not conform to its ideological vision. This form of power is shown to be deeply dehumanizing, reducing lives to statistics and dissent to criminality.

The State, Nationalism, and Authoritarian Power

Roy's critique of the modern nation-state is one of the defining features of her later work. She interrogates the ways in which nationalism becomes a tool for consolidating power, often at the expense of pluralism and democracy. National identity, in Roy's writing, is not a unifying force but a contested and exclusionary construct that marginalizes minorities and suppresses dissent.

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, the state's exercise of power is closely linked to militarization and the rhetoric of security. Regions marked by political resistance are portrayed as spaces where the rule of law is suspended, and violence becomes normalized. Roy exposes how the language of patriotism is used to justify human rights violations, silencing critical voices by branding them as anti-national.

This critique extends to Roy's non-fiction, where she directly challenges state narratives surrounding development, security, and progress. She questions who benefits from these narratives and who pays the price. By foregrounding the experiences of those displaced by large-scale projects or targeted by state violence, Roy reveals the human cost of policies that prioritize power and profit over justice.

Roy's portrayal of state power is not merely oppositional but deeply ethical. She insists on accountability and transparency, arguing that true democracy requires the protection of dissent. Her writing thus becomes a form of resistance in itself, challenging readers to question the legitimacy of authority and the narratives through which it sustains itself.

Resistance as Fragile and Fragmented

Resistance in Roy's works is rarely triumphant or heroic in conventional terms. Instead, it is often fragile, fragmented, and deeply personal. Roy resists romanticizing rebellion, acknowledging the risks and limitations faced by those who oppose powerful systems. This nuanced portrayal underscores the complexity of resistance in contexts where power is deeply entrenched.

In *The God of Small Things*, resistance emerges through acts of transgression that challenge social norms. These acts may appear small or private, but they carry profound political significance. By violating caste boundaries or rejecting prescribed

gender roles, characters assert their humanity against a system that seeks to deny it. However, the consequences of such resistance are severe, highlighting the brutal mechanisms through which power enforces conformity.

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, resistance takes more collective and overt forms, including political activism and solidarity among marginalized communities. Yet even here, resistance is marked by loss and ambiguity. Roy emphasizes that resistance does not always lead to immediate change; its value often lies in its refusal to accept injustice as normal.

Roy's essays further articulate resistance as a moral imperative. She positions the writer as a witness and participant in political struggle, rejecting the notion of artistic neutrality. For Roy, silence in the face of oppression is itself a form of complicity. Her insistence on speaking truth to power reflects a broader commitment to ethical resistance, one that prioritizes justice over comfort or approval.

Language, Narrative, and the Politics of Storytelling

Roy's narrative strategies play a crucial role in her exploration of power and resistance. Her use of non-linear storytelling, multiple perspectives, and lyrical language disrupts conventional narrative authority, mirroring her thematic challenge to dominant power structures. By refusing a single, authoritative viewpoint, Roy creates space for marginalized voices and alternative histories.

Language itself becomes a site of resistance in Roy's writing. She often subverts official discourse by exposing its contradictions and moral emptiness. Bureaucratic language, legal jargon, and nationalist rhetoric are stripped of their legitimacy when confronted with lived experience and human suffering. Through irony and metaphor, Roy reveals how language can both conceal and contest power.

Storytelling functions as an act of remembrance and defiance. By narrating the lives of those erased from official histories, Roy resists the silencing effects of power. Memory becomes a form of resistance, preserving experiences that dominant narratives seek to forget. In this sense, Roy's fiction and non-fiction work together to challenge historical amnesia and affirm the value of individual lives.

Intersectionality and the Ethics of Resistance

A key strength of Roy's work lies in its intersectional approach to power. She recognizes that oppression is rarely singular, operating instead through interconnected systems of caste, class, gender, religion, and nationality. This perspective allows her to portray resistance as equally complex and multifaceted.

Roy's characters and subjects are often those who occupy multiple marginalized positions, making their resistance both urgent and precarious. By foregrounding these experiences, Roy challenges simplistic narratives of oppression and liberation. Resistance, in her work, is not about replacing one form of power with another but about dismantling the structures that perpetuate inequality.

This ethical dimension distinguishes Roy's writing from purely ideological critique. Her commitment to justice is grounded in empathy and human connection, reminding readers that political

struggles are ultimately about lived lives. Resistance, for Roy, is inseparable from compassion and responsibility.

Conclusion

Arundhati Roy's works offer a profound and uncompromising examination of power and resistance in contemporary society. Through her fiction and essays, she exposes the structural nature of oppression while foregrounding the voices of those most affected by it. Her critique encompasses caste, patriarchy, state violence, nationalism, and global capitalism, revealing how these forces intersect to shape individual and collective experience.

Resistance in Roy's writing is complex and often uncertain, reflecting the realities faced by those who challenge entrenched power. Yet it remains a central and necessary force, embodied in acts of defiance, storytelling, and moral courage. By refusing silence and neutrality, Roy transforms literature into a space of political engagement and ethical reflection.

Ultimately, Roy's exploration of power and resistance underscores the enduring relevance of literature as a tool for social critique. Her works remind readers that while power may seek to dominate and silence, resistance persists in voices that refuse to be erased. Through her bold and compassionate vision, Roy redefines the role of the writer as both witness and participant in the struggle for justice, making her work a vital contribution to contemporary literary and political discourse.

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