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ARUNDHATI ROY, MOST IMPORTANT 'IN INDIA' WRITER SINCE TAGORE?

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RESPONSE TO Dr R.S. Sharma, 'The Mistress of English Prose' (Issue 1023, Vol. 14, 8-12 Feb 07 - review of Murari Prasad, ed., ARUNDHATI ROY: CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES, Delhi: Pencraft, 2006

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Among today's clutch of Indian writers in English, Arundhati Roy is not only unusually famous but famously unusual. She is an international best-seller, yet she lives in India and is not liable to the charges of inauthenticity frequently levelled at diasporic writers. She is seen as a regional novelist of Kerala, yet was born in 1961, not there but in Shillong (then in Assam, now in Meghalaya), to a Hindu Bengali father and Kerala Christian mother. She has written only one novel, the Booker-winning *The God of Small Things*, yet is considered a leading novelist by the critical establishment even though the rest of her work consists of two screenplays and a large body of non-fiction of a campaigning and journalistic nature.

As a scholar of Indian Writing in English (IWE) myself, I responded in the *Yemen Times* earlier this year (Issue 1021, Vol. 14, 1 February 2007) to Dr Prasant K. Sinha's review of another book edited by Dr Prasad, *Vikram Seth's 'A Suitable Boy': An Anthology of Recent Criticism*. I am now pleased to be able to respond similarly to Dr Sharma's review of the volume *Arundhati Roy: Critical Perspectives* (which I did not contribute to as such, but did participate in as one of the peer-readers). It consists of a brief foreword by postcolonial guru Bill Ashcroft, a long introduction by Dr Prasad, nine essays on Roy (including one by the editor), an interview with Roy from 2001 (reprinted from *Frontline*), and an extensive bibliography. One of the contributors, Antonia Navarro-Tejero, of Córdoba (Spain), is also the author of a full-length study of Roy and Githa Hariharan. Like Dr Sharma, I applaud the quality and utility of this volume for those studying, teaching or simply interested in Arundhati Roy. I would, however, like in this brief piece to qualify aspects of his assertions and to raise some additional points.

Dr Sharma correctly notes that 'a proper estimation of Roy's activism is still awaited', but this book certainly makes a start in that direction. There have been various critical anthologies and studies dedicated to *The God of Small Things*, but to the best of my knowledge this is the first to attempt a comprehensive coverage of both that novel and her non-fiction - notably in Murari Prasad's own essay, which ambitiously straddles the fiction / non-fiction divide. What, though, no-one in this volume attempts is a detailed comparison of Roy's non-fictional practice to that of other IWE authors. Joel Kuortti, in an article of 2004, did compare Roy's and Rushdie's political non-fiction; but, for instance, Amitav Ghosh has produced substantial amounts of non-fiction, some of it as politically engaged as the anti-nuclear *Countdown*. Vikram Seth's *Two Lives* is also historically engaged non-fiction. Surely, more than Roy is involved here.

Dr Sharma claims that one weakness of the book is a certain narrowness, in that 'most of the essays operate within the single parameter of postcolonialism'. This is not entirely fair. As Dr Sharma does actually note himself, the more strictly political dimension is discussed, as is the feminist aspect. Aijaz Ahmad takes head-on the vexed issue of Roy's unsympathetic portrayal of Kerala communism in her novel; Antonia Navarro-Tejero's dissection of the exploitative character Chacko

critiques Kerala Marxism, thus strongly diverging from Ahmad, while also offering a feminist reading with stress on subalternhood. The volume has sufficient balance.

The complex and multi-stranded *content* of Roy's novel is, in fact, sufficiently dealt with in the volume: what it does lack is a really substantial discussion of its *language*. Murari Prasad himself, in 2004, did publish a paper going into that vital aspect in detail, and a similar piece would have usefully enriched this collection. As it is, Aijaz rather polemically claims in his essay that Roy is 'the first Indian writer in English where a marvellous stylistic resource becomes available for provincial, vernacular culture ... without the book reading as a translation'. He even contrasts her novel with Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, whose English is famously pervaded by Kannada, arguing that in that book Rao 'wrote in English what could easily have been written in another Indian language' (pp. 40-41). This clashes with the widely-held view that *The God of Small Things* is comparably pervaded by Malayalam inflections, as represented in this volume by Alex Tickell ('these [linguistic] experiments occur in close proximity to ... Malayalam' - p. 67). There is a potential controversy here that seems worth taking up, and it would be interesting for a neutral scholar to look at Roy's stylistics closely and compare her English in detail with Malayalam usage (such a study would, though, need to be accessible to the non-Malayali reader).

Also not taken up by either book or review is the massive international popularity of Roy's novel - it is said to have sold over 4 million in over two dozen language versions - and the related issue of translation. How has *The God of Small Things* been received in, say, France, a country where much of her non-fiction has also been translated? Has the Spanish translation of her novel been received differently in Spain's European and Latin America's third-world contexts? What difficulties have Roy's translators experienced in rendering her very particular brand of English, and what strategies have they used to get its flavour across?

There, a whole slew of issues remain to be resolved. Meantime, the contributor Amitava Kumar reminds us that Arundhati Roy has become 'perhaps the most important writer in India familiar to the West since Rabindranath Tagore' (p. 31). She remains an 'in India' writer though so many have chosen diasporic hybridity. The very special status of her writing is vindicated by both Dr Prasad's excellent compilation and Dr Sharma's very judicious review. And yet, in response to the questions her work raises, perhaps the best the critic can do is recall the finale of *The God of Small Things*, and echo Roy's own moving one word of closure, 'Tomorrow'.