

# Search For Identity In Arundhati Roy's Novel

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**Abstract:** Arundhati Roy's search for identity asserts that she could not write until it comes from within. She firmly states that she could not be a writer for hire. Arundhati Roy eschews traditional practices and gives free reins to her individual vision. Her literature is neither a means of escaping reality nor a vehicle for parading political, social, religious, and moral ideas. What differentiates Arundhati Roy from the other Indo-Anglican novelists is her capacity to transform the alienation experiences into the monument of living art. Arundhati Roy's characters alienate in order to involve themselves in a frantic quest for their identity.

**KEY WORDS/DESCRIPTIONS:** Search for identity, trivial and insignificant, psychological and emotional, untouchables, Indo-Anglican novelists, alienation and identity, quest for identity.

## 1. Introduction

Her fiction is an inextricable mix of experience and imagination. She tells that her book is a very sad book and somehow the sadness is what stays with her. The five years of writing the book made her to keep finding herself making an effort to be happy.

### Anita Desai in an interview has said:

I think theories of the novel are held by those of an academic or critical turn of mind, not the creative. A writer does not create a novel by observing a given set of theories... he follows flashes of individual vision, and relies on a kind of instinct that tells him what to follow and what to avoid, how to veer away from what would be destructive to his vision. It is these flashes of vision, and a kind of trained instinct that leads him... not any theories (Atma Ram, "An Interview with Anita Desai "World Literature written in English 100).

## 2. Search for identity

Arundhati Roy search for identity ended her in becoming a writer she asserts that she could not write until it comes from within. She could not write even a column like that. Even if somebody offers her a huge sum of money for writing a screen play based on a given theme her answer would be no to it. She firmly states that she could not be a writer for hire. Arundhati Roy eschews traditional practices and gives free reins to her individual vision. Like Edgar Allan Poe, Henry James, E.M. Forster, Roy is at once critic and creative writer. Most of the Indo-Anglican novels are the result of a deliberate planning and plotting. In case of Roy, they are an instinctive outcome of her inner motivations and compulsions- her desire to show as well as to see. It is a natural and vegetative growth. The object that triggers her imagination could be very trivial and insignificant Unlike the other Indo-Anglican novelists Roy's predominant concern is not with the society or society forces but the individual psyche and its inter action with social values. She creates an opulent gallery of characters, though dominated by the female. Her protagonists are hyper sensitive females. They are hypochondriacs. Each is presented as an inscrutable individual, enigmatic and eccentric.

Neither is they chosen from the common rung of the society nor are their problems related to food, clothing and shelter. They are rebels and their rebellion is not so much directed against society as against individuals. Their problems are neither physical nor social. They are psychical and emotional. Unlike R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Bhabani Bhattacharya, Arundhati Roy is chiefly concerned with the portrayal of inward or psychic reality of the characters. For her, literature is neither a means of escaping reality nor a vehicle for parading political, social, religious, and moral ideas. It is an exploration and an enquiry. Roy imparts no message, preaches no morals. Narayan, Anand and Bhattacharya have opulence of subject matter, and richness of experience. But a woman novelist has her limits. Yet her novel has intensity, though not variety. Though her novel has references to contemporaneity they are not deliberately or elaborately dealt with. In dealing with the problem of the alienated self, she has adopted a realistic mode of writing. Her characters' quest for identity is different from that of Savithri in R.K.Narayan's *The Dark Room* or Madeleine in Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope*. The assaults of existence are the outcome of a society in which norms and values have degenerated. Her protagonist, for example Velutha is a socio-psychic rebel, recalcitrant self, who finds it difficult to compromise with the milieu. He frantically endeavours to escape from the dreadful untouchability but in the process enters another world- Terrorism/ Marxism, equally disturbing and disheartening. Thus it lies cloistered in a world, where there is a perpetual and persistent struggle between the physical and the psychic, leading to the triumph of the latter over the former. The temporal existence of the self in contrast to the eternity of the soul is the crux on which the fictional tapestry of Roy rests. The flux of recollections and ruminations that perpetually keep haunting the psyche of the characters in an aspect of the individual self which is at loggerheads with the socio-psychic reality. Roy mirrors the mythic reality of our life through the complex interaction of the self and society. Roy seldom offers any acceptable solution or clear-cut conclusions. There is hardly any abrupt revelation or surprises. Not even much overt anguish or vivid emotion. There is a kind of aerial drowsiness and an awful equanimity. There seems no noticeable effort at carrying the narrative forward. The novelist prefers to meander from episode to episode in a dubious willfulness. Roy creates a hazy and blurred landscape, slotting in a story here and a suggestion there. Unlike Narayan and Malgonkar, Arundhati Roy does not believe in a pre- conceived plot. She does not believe in its linear movement in terms of exposition, conflict and resolution. For her, the plot is just an idea occupying one's subconscious, mind, a fragment of her imagination and a

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flash of her vision. Anand, Narayan and Bhattacharya wrote for social documentation and hence they selected characters from amongst socio-economic preys and predators. Arundhati Roy, on the other hand, is concerned with the delineation of psychological reality, and hence prefers such characters that are peculiar and eccentric rather than general and common place. English in the hands of Roy becomes so flexible and tractable that it not only yields to the steering and churning of her intellect and the movement of her pen but also rises to such poetic heights so as to mirror and manifest her visions and views. This is conveyed through her stream of consciousness technique, her use of flashbacks and lyrical language. In dealing with the psyche of the characters, their motivations and compulsions, she moves along the labyrinthine and dimly-lit corridors of inner reality. Most of the English novelists study man and his world in relation to the objective social reality. They used their art as a powerful "Public instrument" (Daiches 1965:01) to present social problems, where as Roy writes neither for providing entertainment nor the dissemination and propagation of social ideas. Her main pre-occupation is to study human existence and human predicament, her exploration being a quest for self. She is the novelist of psycho emotional situations and her theme is the individual against himself and against the milieu. She has a double function- to pull away the individual from the social milieu, so that "he can be put in extremis, and to act as an agent of self-confrontation" (Alien 1954:303) The Indo-Anglian novel till 1970s treated themes of political and social import. It exhibited a splendid array of limited, contrarious items: princes and paupers, saints and sinners, white men and babus, farmers and labourers untouchables and coolies, prosperity and adversity, cities and villages. Mulk Raj Anand and Bhabani Bhattacharya were pioneers in this field. Writers like Raja Rao, Kamala Markandaya and Kushwant Singh dealt with more impressive and sophisticated themes like the country's independence movement, East - West encounter, tradition and modernity, materialism and spiritualism. The very notion of gauging the unexplored recesses or an individual's mind, of transcending the narrow and shallow inscriptions of the physical self was alien to them. Such a long neglected themes were given an emotionally poetic treatment by Roy. By shifting the realism of her novel from outer to inner reality and fathoming the internal recesses of the human psyche, she brought the Indo-Anglian novel into the mainstream of European and American fiction. An important phase in the growth of fiction in India as elsewhere, is the gradual shifting of focus from the external world to the inner world of the individual, capturing the atmosphere of the mind, and directly involving the reader "In the flow of a particular consciousness" (Lawrence, "Morality and Novel", Lodge (ed) 20th Century Lit. Criticism 130) A unique feature of Roy's characterisation is her dexterous handling of objective correlatives. These objective correlatives project the alienation and identity of the characters. It is, in fact, the alienation that motivates them in their quest for identity. She has been able to create a master piece in Indo-Anglian literature that has won her the most coveted Booker Prize for Literature. Her fiction takes its form and tone from polarities and irreconcilables. Oddities and eccentricities of character, disintegration of personality and morbidity or temperament, the prose of order and the poetry of disorder, alienation and depersonalisation of identity constitute the tradition she draws upon. One remembers

Virginia Woolf for whom: Life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. (The common Reading 177) What differentiates Arundhati Roy from the other Indo-Anglian novelists is her capacity to transform the alienation experiences into the monument of living art. It is neither the concern of an absurdist nor the enigma faced by an existentialist but the simple, homely rendering of emotions of individuals who face abnormal situations in living and partly living every moment of life of an alien soil in a strangely fascinating way. Historical themes like partition dealing with alienation have found an important place in the novels of Mulk Raj Anand, Manohar Malgonkar, Kushwant Smgh, Attia Hosain, Chaman Nahal and Nayantara Sahgal. Though there are references to communism in Kerala in *The God of Small Things* it is patchy and sketchy. Such references only serve as a foil to alienation of the protagonist Velutha. Roy has built her novel round the struggle within the self, the dismal and morbid moods of men and women. Like Arun Joshi, she explores the depths of human psyche against the muddling social back drop. Writing is a means of discovering her own identity of unravelling the hidden truth of life. Narayan's use of irony, Raja Rao's acceptance of Indian metaphysics is irrelevant to Mrs. Roy's fictional needs. Even the doctrinaire humanism of Mulk Raj. Anand and the sanguine exploits of Kushwant Singh and Malgonkar are alien to her art of fiction. On a small canvas, she weaves the web of the protagonist's anguished odyssey. Roy's work clearly indicates the direction Indian fiction was taking in the hands of the third generation of urban writers. It is the turning inward of Indian fiction from the romantic tryst in gardens or on river-banks to a more meaningful exploration of the world of reality. What matters to her is the character and not the tale, the situation and not the environment, the depth and not the dimension. Esoteric and secret passions and tensions occupy her interest. Roy's novel is mainly concerned about things that every individual longs for - the courage to live and the capacity to love as well as beloved. Her characters Ammu, Velutha or even Rahel and Estha are characters without roots. It is their alienated state that propels them from crisis to crisis, sucking in its wake several other characters. They are presented mostly as seekers-questers through love-questers for identity. Emotionally and psychically perturbed, Ammu and Velutha are relentlessly and maniacally driven by undefined hunger and feverish lust which bring about their own fall. Incapable of silent submission and ungrudging suffering, they somehow pull the load of life. Roy's novel is a blending and binding of both exterior lanscape and interior vision. Her protagonists suffer from lack of parental love, disturbed infancy, broken homes. They are disgruntled with their existence and often opt out of the mainstream of life. Alienation in Roy's characters often manifests in immoral ties and activities which we hardly find in any other Indian women novelist except Shobha De and Anita Desai. Alienated from their selves, Roy's protagonists search for their identity in the milieu through self-discovery and self-identification. Roy has made the landscape not just a backdrop but an environment reflecting the isolation and nostalgia of the alienated self. She uses memory, in a series of internal monologues to give us an access to the character's minds. Through the psychology of association, the reader is made to participate triumphantly in the character's movements back and forth in time. The

world outside reason appears to be the major dimension of her work, where she probes the manifestations of the irrational inhuman relationships. Roy does not fully expose the childhood of her protagonists, but whatever flashbacks she provides are enough. Her characters Estha and Rahel tend to lose their vital self in the course of their growth from infancy to adulthood. Her characters Estha and Rahel tend to lose their vital self in the course of their growth from infancy to adulthood. Narayan's protagonists face alienation with compromise and conciliation. In Naipaul, alienation leads to the foraging of a new identity and a new life. Arun Joshi and Kamala Markandaya dealt with the impulse behind alienation and its harrowing effect upon the individual. In Mulk Raj Anand, alienation is solely limited to the socio-political milieu. Balachandra Rajan, too, deals with the dilemma of the rootless individual. Nayantara Sahgal handles alienation more persistently and resolutely. Arundhati Roy's characters alienate in order to involve themselves in a frantic quest for their identity. It involves in a psycho-emotionally oriented identity crisis. Roy's characters' search is man's search for his political milieu. Balachandra Rajan, too, deals with the dilemma of the rootless individual. Nayantara Sahgal handles alienation more persistently and resolutely. Arundhati Roy's characters alienate in order to involve themselves in a frantic quest for their identity. It involves in a psycho-emotionally oriented identity crisis. The novel can be said to be about several other things. Those interested in politics can claim that it is a satire on politics — communist establishment, to be more specific. One can call it a protest novel which is radical, subversive and taboo-breaking. Still another way may be that it tells the story of a family. Those worried about religion can certainly give a religious tone to it. An anti-establishment dimension can also be given to the novel if one wishes to do so. The book has in it a strong position taken against the way the 'untouchables' are treated in the society. New York Times has made the following comments on Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* which won the prestigious Booker Prize in 1981 : "The literary map of India is about to be redrawn...*Midnight's Children* sounds like a continent finding its voice, an author to welcome to world company." Seventeen years later Arundhati Roy has brought the honour again, this time to a small state in the South of the country and, of course, to the country at large. Roy joins the company of Rushdie "to welcome to World Company." As Jain (1996) observes in her *Introduction to Women's Writing: Text and Context*, "with all its variety, timidity and marginality it (*Women's Writing*) has been moving through self-expression and self-questioning towards self-assertion and redefinitions. It has projected alternative structures and meanings, and transformed disorder and chaos into enabling structures. It has attempted to dissolve polarities and move towards pluralistic meanings" (p. XVI). A word should be said about the use of time and space in the novel. A huge general shift in perception and in consciousness for the western world heralded the modern century. As Hughes (1958) has observed "nearly all students of the last years of the nineteenth century have sensed in some form or another profound psychological change" (p. 34). It meant rejection of positivism, and abandoning the notion of "Objectivity". But one of the most striking features of the period was a fascination with time, space and their relationship. Randall Stevenson has pointed out that during the 1920's, time and space became fashionable terminology and a conscious

theme among artists and intellectuals. The *God of Small Things* received a great acclaim throughout the world and one of the critics says: The joy of *The God of Small Things* is that it appeals equally to the head and to the heart. It is clever and complex, yet it makes one laugh, and finally, moves one to tears. A master piece, utterly exceptional. (-William Darlymple, *Harpers and Queen Praise For The God of Small Things, TGST*) Arundhati Roy's debut novel "*The God of Small Things*" was launched on 4 April 1997 in Delhi and won the Booker Prize in London, on 14th Oct. 1997. In the intervening period, she received a reported \$500,000 in advance and the rights to her book were sold in 21 countries. The book was completed in May 1996 and passed to an agent in June. She was not particularly confident about the publishing of the book because she felt: It is a very fragile, personal book and I have never had any perspective about it. I considered going to an Indian publisher but they tend to give advances of Rs.5, 000. However I wasn't sure about finding a foreign publisher. I mean, why would anyone abroad be interested in the book? I am not very well educated. I haven't lived abroad. So it's not as though I am like Salman Rushdie or Vikram Seth. ([http://www.arundhati\\_roy.org.uk](http://www.arundhati_roy.org.uk)) Then she met Pankaj Mishra, an editor with Harper Collins in India, and author of the travel book '*Butter Chicken in Ludhiana*', Mishra was excited by what he read and he sent copies of the manuscript to three British publishers, with his comment "This is the biggest book since *Midnight's Children*" (*Ibid*). Though two of the three were ready to make offers for the British rights, the third [recipient of the manuscript, David Godwin, a literary agent, caught a flight to India [explicitly to meet Roy and sign her up. Roy chose him because, "Obviously, the book had touched him enough to get on a plane and come to a strange country". (*Ibid*) When talking about writing she says: Ever since as a child I knew that people had to do things when they grew up. I knew that I wanted to be a writer. (*Ibid*) Some readers doubt whether this novel is autobiographical for which she answers: It's very difficult question to answer because I think all fiction does spring from your experience, but it is also the melding of the imagination and your experience. It is the emotional texture of the book and the feelings which are real. (*Ibid*) The words, expressions cascade all through the novel. In some places the words are broken on the other hand in some places they are unusually fused together like -Lay. Ter. A nowl, sourmeatalsmell, which adds beauty to the usual words. She has repeated certain phrases to give it the effect of a lullaby. In a way it helps to take away the shock of the plot. She has written in the way she thinks. So there is a free flow of words and emotions. While talking about the structure of the novel she says: I think that one of the most important things about the structure is that in some way the structure of the book ambushes the story. You know, it tells a different story from the story the book is telling. In the first chapter I more or less tell you the story, but the novel ends in the middle of the story, and it ends with Ammu and Velutha making love and it ends on the word 'tomorrow'. And though you know that what tomorrow brings is terrible, the fact that the book ends there is to say that even though it's terrible it's wonderful that it happened at all. ([http://www.arundhati\\_roy.org.uk](http://www.arundhati_roy.org.uk)) In spite of achieving the most coveted Booker Prize she is not taken by pride because she knows fame comes and goes. To her the inspiration for the book was not an idea or a character but an image - the image of a sky blue Plymouth stuck at the rail road crossing

with the twins inside and the Marxist procession raging around it. She considers fiction as a way of seeing, of making sense of the world and only a key is needed to begin to do that. This above mentioned image was just a key. She says, "For me (the novel) was five years of almost changing and mutating, and growing a new skin. It's almost like a part of me," (<http://www.arundhati.roy.org.uk>).

### 3. Conclusion

She has written as if an architect designs a building. To her it was like designing an intricately balanced structure and when it was finished. She says: When I write, I never re-write a sentence because for me my thought and my writing are one thing. It's like breathing; I don't re-breathe a breath..... Arranging the bones of the story took time, but it was never painful. Everything I have my intellect, my experience, my feelings have been used. If someone doesn't like it, it is like saying they don't like my all bladder. I can't do anything about it.(Ibid). Another critic feels that "A novel of real ambition must invent its own language, and this one does.....": (John updike, the New Yorker-on the rear cover of the book TGST)

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