

# **Privatisation, Inequality and ‘Othering’: A Critique of Neo-Liberalism in Arundhati Roy’s Selected Essays**

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## **Abstract**

*In the wake of neo-liberalism, the past few decades have witnessed the varied forms of socio-political and economic disparities. On one hand, big business and corporate banners are flourishing day after day. On the other hand, the poor marginalised people are gradually sinking into poverty. Arundhati Roy, an Indian author and political activist, offers a critique of neo-liberalism and its varied forms of globalisation and privatisation through her essays. Roy’s four essays titled “The Greater Common Good” (1999), “Power Politics: The Reincarnation of Rumpelstiltskin” (2002), “Public Power in the Age of Empire” (2004) and “Capitalism: A ghost Story” (2014) have been selected for the purpose of study in the present research paper. This paper discusses how neo-liberal economic order gives birth to inequality; and the process of ‘othering’ on the basis of class, caste, gender and ethnicity.*

**Keywords:** *Globalisation, Inequality, Neo-liberalism, Otherness*

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## **Introduction**

Neo-liberalism is one of the most significant ‘isms’ of the twentieth century. The term has continuously been used with varied implications throughout the decades. The prefix ‘neo’ equated the

term with the revival of classical liberalism of late eighteenth century. At the beginning of the century, it was considered a modern version of *laissez-faire*. In early 1990s, however, neo-liberalism was popularised as a derogatory term with “a set of economic institutions and policies alleged to have been designed by the United States to globalize American capitalism and its associated cultural system” (Steger 2010, x). It has come under a series of criticisms until then. In *Neoliberalism: A Very Short Introduction*, Manfred B. Steger and Ravi K. Roy define it in the following lines:

‘Neoliberalism’ is a rather broad and general concept referring to an economic model or ‘paradigm’ that rose to prominence in the 1980s. Built upon the classical liberal ideal of the self-regulating market, neoliberalism comes in several strands and variations. Perhaps the best way to conceptualize neoliberalism is to think of it as three intertwined manifestations: (1) an ideology; (2) a mode of governance; (3) a policy package. (Steger 2010, 11)

First of all, neo-liberalism is an ideology to manoeuvre public discourse in favour of an idealised image of consumerist and free-market economic order. The big-banner business houses, capitalists and politicians build an illusionary image for the manipulation of public discourse using media and technology. Secondly, neo-liberalism is a privatised and decentralised mode of governance. Rather than pursuing public good, it privatises the public sphere to saturate the self-interests of the favoured few. Herein, neo-liberalism ranges from neo-colonialism to new imperialism where third world is under the continuous siege of the imperialist powers of the first world. Thirdly, as a policy package, it is closely associated with privatisation and globalisation. Broadly speaking, neo-liberalism is “a concrete set of public policies expressed in what we like to call the ‘D-L-P Formula’: (1) deregulation (of the economy); (2) liberalization (of trade and industry); and (3) privatization (of state-owned enterprises)” (Steger 2010, 14).

Undoubtedly, neo-liberalism is a global phenomenon nowadays. It is widely criticised for its neglect of ecological concerns; opposition to multiculturalism; giving rise to varied forms of inequalities; its abhorrence of diversity; and exploitation and othering of the poor marginalised groups. However, the present research paper studies the undemocratic face of neo-liberal economic policies in India, which often result in the destitution of a large number of poor communities like *Dalits* and *Adivasis*. It also focuses on how the devastation of poor and tribal people as well as the environment is being justified in the name of economic progress. The present paper offers a trenchant critique of neo-liberalism and privatisation in the context of Arundhati Roy's selected essays. It brings forth the ostracism of millions of indigenous people from their own land and resources. Roy's four essays: "The Greater Common Good" (1999), "Power Politics: The Reincarnation of Rumpelstiltskin" (2002), "Public Power in the Age of Empire" (2004) and "Capitalism: A ghost Story" (2014) have been selected for the purpose of study in the present research paper. In 2019, these essays published in Roy's collection of essays titled *My Seditious Heart: Collected Non-Fiction*. The selected essays critically analyse the aftermaths of neo-liberalism, which often resulted in inequality, and the process of 'othering' based on the pre-existing socio-cultural phenomena of caste and gender and their interconnectedness.

Arundhati Roy is an Indian novelist and essayist writing in English. She has hitherto published two critically acclaimed novels – *The God of Small Things* (1997) which received Man Booker Prize and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017). Her novels touch on the matters of complex caste and class relations, memory and trauma, patriarchal repression, ecological concerns and identity politics. Along with her two works of fiction, Roy has written numerous essays on contemporary culture and politics. In the history of Indian English Prose tradition, she has achieved an enviable position as an

essayist. After the publication of her first novel, Roy has dedicated the next more than two decades to the cause of downtrodden people who are marginalised on the basis of caste, gender, religion, ethnicity and economic inequalities in India especially *Dalits* and *Adivasis*. For addressing their issues, she has chosen the literary genre of 'political essay'. Like fiction, her nonfiction also revolves around the themes of social and political discriminations. Moreover, her essays focus on these matters with more subtle approach.

Moreover, India has a long tradition of political essays. Since Indian subcontinent's struggle for independence, political and polemical essays have been playing a crucial role in the eradication of socio-cultural and political wrongdoings. The reformist pamphlets, petitions for quality education, debates about colonialism were the subject-matters of earliest prose published by indigenous press. Roy contributes to the same tradition with her tireless efforts in the post-colonial India. She has written more than fifty essays on contemporary culture and politics. Her essays draw attention to millions of small narratives of poverty-stricken marginalised communities. The human rights, inequality, globalisation, privatisation and environmental issues are central to both Roy's activism and political essays.

### **Displacement of *Adivasis***

The term 'displacement' stands for the forced dislocation of people within state borders. This should not be confused with 'refugee'. The United Nations, in "Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement", differentiates it from external displacement. It occurs when,

persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or

human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border. (UN 1999, 1)

Following this definition, it can be clearly stated that the ‘displaced’ *Adivasis* belong to the category of internally displaced persons who lose their place of living to the ‘human-made disasters’. This category is further elaborated in the principle six of the document as follows: “In cases of large-scale development projects, which are not justified by compelling and overriding public interests” (UN 1999, 2). It comes under the basic human rights of internally displaced persons to be protected against exploitation. Roy’s essays are a medium to earn the displaced tribal communities their own unique place between the mainstream society and culture.

Written over the past twenty years, the selected essays cover the history of more than forty years of numerous developmental projects in India. In the backdrop of various small and big dams being constructed under Narmada Valley Development project, the harsh experience of a great number of dislocated people is unfolded in all the four essays. Narmada Valley project is delineated from the outset in the essays. This project includes building nearly thirty-two hundred dams on Narmada and its forty-one tributaries. It covers three states of India: Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat. The main purpose is to increase irrigation and hydro-electricity. Some of the big dams constructed under the project, to name a few, included in the essays are Sardar Sarovar Dam, Sri Maheshwar Dam, Bargi Dam, Kalpasar Dam, Ukai Dam and Karjan Dam. The construction of these dams has engendered wide-spread destruction and displacement of poor innocent folks from their own land.

Roy’s essays provide a voice over to the victims of economic inequality. A great number of tribal communities have been displaced by various development projects since independence in India. However, the scarcity of rehabilitation policies has adversely affected

their livelihood. They have lost control over their lands which, in return, altered their customs and lifestyle. The selected essays revolve around the questions of displaced tribal communities as a result of the construction of above mentioned dams; the dislocated masses are either paid very low or no compensations for their lands; and, moreover, there are no sufficient rehabilitation plans for relocating their livelihood. In “Capitalism: A Ghost Story”, Roy recounts,

The millions of landless people, the majority of them Dalits and Adivasis, driven from their villages, living in slums and shanty colonies in small towns and megacities, do not figure even in the radical discourse. (Roy 2019, 624)

Roy states that approximately fifty-six million people are displaced and almost half of them are *Adivasis* and *Dalits*. She uses the imagery of a mass grave for the displaced folks. First hand experiences of many communities of Tadvi, Dongria Kond, Ho, Oraon, Kol, Santhal, Munda, Kevat and Kahar tribes are narrated by Roy. All of them are very ancient tribes of small farmers, fishermen and ferrymen.

In “The Greater Common Good”, Roy brings forth that how the construction of big dams has been always equated with the meta-narrative of overall national growth and development. Jawaharlal Nehru coined the term ‘modern Temples’ for dams in his speech delivered before the Twenty-Ninth Annual Meeting of the Central Board of Irrigation and Power on November 17<sup>th</sup>, 1958. Therefore, for Roy, this speech marked the beginning of a great meta-narrative of equating the national development with the construction of various dams in India. It is being assured by the government that the destruction caused by development projects is for the purpose of ‘the greater common good’. The displacement of millions is justified “in the name of Progress, in the name of the National Interest” (Roy 2019, 34). Whosoever tries to disclose the other hidden side of this

myth, they have been labelled as anti-development and irrational individuals. Roy aptly points out in the essay,

It is seen as a war between modern, rational, progressive forces of ‘Development’ versus a sort of Neo-Luddite impulse – an irrational, emotional ‘anti-development resistance, fuelled by an Arcadian, pre-industrial dream. (Roy 2019, 27)

The writer brings to light that how a varied number of dichotomies are created by neo-liberal forces to meet their selfish ends. Every attempt of resistance is greeted with scorn and hatred by calling them anti-national voices of dissent. Roy dismantles this myth of “the local pain for national gain” in her political essays (Roy 2019, 31).

Against the backdrop of a grand narrative of national development, the selected essays highlight many small hidden narratives of various tribal communities. Jean-Francois Lyotard, a French philosopher, asserts the idea of deconstructing overarching grand and meta-narratives in his work *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. He brings the concept of ‘mini-narratives’ to the forefront. The unitary big narrative is “losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal” (Lyotard 1984, xxiv). It is rather being dispersed into a variety of small ‘clouds’ (a simile used by Lyotard for mini-narratives) of different shapes, sizes and lengths communicating in different languages. Peter Barry defines Lyotard’s ideas in his own words as follows:

‘Grand Narratives’ of progress and human perfectibility, then, are no longer tenable, and the best we can hope for is a series of ‘mininarratives’, which are provisional, contingent, temporary, and relative and which provide a basis for the action of specific groups in particular local circumstances. (Barry 2014, 83)

Roy's essays give a vivid picture of these small narratives in their entirety. They range from individual accounts to collective protests. In "The Greater Common Good", Roy depicts Narmada Bachao Andolan as one of such collective narratives of resistance. She envisions twenty-first century as "The dismantling of the Big. Big bombs, big dams, big ideologies, big contradictions, big countries, big wars, big heroes, big mistakes. Perhaps it will be the century of the small" (Roy 2019, 28). The 'Big' with capital 'B' should be now dismantled into numerous 'smalls'. In this essay, she further portrays the tales of suffering and woe from Tadvi *Adivasis* of Gujarat. Mohan Bai Tadvi, owner of eight acres, became a landless labourer. He was forced to sell his ancestral land at a very low price. Dersukh Bai and Deviben had met with the same fate. Another Tadvi *Adivasis* from Undava named Bhaiji Bhai and his village people were also forced to sell their land for the construction of Wonder Canal. Many families from a small village in Maharashtra called Manibeli decided not to leave their homes despite the rise of water. Consequently, many of them died during flood in 1993.

In "Power Politics: The Reincarnation of Rumpelstiltskin", Roy tells how, after the completion of the Bargi Dam, the flood had destroyed one hundred and sixty-two villages in 1990. Many of them were shifted to resettlement colonies where some died of hunger. The others started living on the outskirts of Jabalpur and became labourers. "Capitalism: A Ghost Story" recounts a protest by small gathering of villagers in Kallinganagar. They protested against not being paid a sufficient compensation for their lands. On 2 January 2006, they were brutally beaten up by armed police officers. Another sad incident is told where an *Adivasi* school teacher from Bastar met with a cruel fate in the hands of Police. She was tortured in an inhuman way in jail. This essay puts forward the unlawful seize of tribal land for "public interest" by private business houses. Vedanta Limited is a private mining company of India. It has taken control



over the land of Dongria Kond tribe. It used the taglines such as ‘Mining Happiness’ and sponsored film competitions under the title ‘Creating Happiness’. The issues faced by Dongria Kond tribe are taken up time and again by Roy in other essays too. Apart from an account of the struggle of tribal communities over dams, some of the selected essays give an account of armed protests in the forests of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Orissa and West Bengal.

Although the selected essays are centred largely on Indian subcontinent, yet it encompasses the larger global phenomenon of concentration of resources in a few hands all over the globe. These essays address the issue that how investment made by the multinational companies has unhoused citizens of the Third World from their own land as well as capital. The selected essays criticise the displacement of a number of tribal communities by various dam, mining and irrigation projects in India. Clearly, the free market economy is hostile to not only the livelihoods of the poor and downtrodden population in millions (especially aboriginal tribes), but also to the environment.

### **A demon of privatisation**

“Power Politics: The Reincarnation of Rumpelstiltskin” exposes the evil face of twentieth-century neo-liberal forces of capitalism and privatisation. Roy reinterprets the German myth of a mischievous imp, Rumpelstiltskin, in the context of global economic forces of neo-liberalism. In our times, according to Roy, Rumpelstiltskin – the metamorphosed devil is more “Powerful, pitiless and armed to the teeth. . . . His realm is raw capital, his conquests emerging markets, his prayers profits, his borders limitless, his weapons nuclear” (Roy 2019, 76). In fact, Roy animates the haunting image of Rumpelstiltskin to unravel the deceptive and corrupt nature of public policies and global politics. The sphere of the demon of privatisation is wide beyond imagination. All the mega-projects such as dams,

mines, power plants, telecommunications and the industrial infrastructure are under his monopoly. The poor tribal communities are his prey and he feeds on them.

India now boasts of being the world's larger dam builder. According to the Central Water Commission, we have 3600 dams that qualify as Big Dams, 3300 of them built after Independence. One thousand more are under construction. Yet one-fifth of our population – two hundred million people – does not have safe drinking water, and two-thirds – six hundred million – lack basic sanitation. (Roy 2019, 30)

The above lines, taken from “The Greater Common Good”, clearly portray a real picture of privatisation. It is a contract between big corporate houses and the elite ruling parties of the world. But the brutal consequences faced by millions of poor people in the form homelessness and exile. The essay defines the privatisation and its working in modern liberal democracies in the following words:

What does privatization really mean? Essentially, it is the transfer of public assets from the state to private companies. Productive assets include natural resources. Earth, forest, water, air. These are the assets that the state holds in trust for the people it represents. In a country like India, 70 percent of the population lives in rural areas. That is seven hundred million people. Their lives depend directly on access to natural resources. To snatch those away and sell them as stock to private companies a process of barbaric dispossession on a scale that has no parallel in history. (Roy 2019, 81)

Similarly, in “Public Power in the Age of Empire”, Roy questions the existence of a true democratic state. The economies of the third-world countries are under the thumb of free market. This exemplifies the rise of neo-colonialism, which works in close association of privatisation. Big corporations are taking control of first-world markets, natural resources, minerals to meet their own greed.

Similarly, “Capitalism: A Ghost Story” criticises the concentration of money in a few hands such as: Tatas, Jindals, Vedanta, Mittals, Infosys, to name a few. These families own almost every sector in India. Even mountains, rivers and forests are privatised and handed over to private sector. Roy’s essays offer a harsh critique of the prevalent scenario – an uncontrollable and unquenchable demon of privatisation. Moreover, the demon of privatisation has engulfed other third world countries also. India is a microcosm of this widespread destruction on the name of progress and development. The first-world has been continuously subjugating the third-world countries under the banner of making the entire world a ‘global village’. China, Japan, Malaysia, Thailand are no exceptions than India.

The Selected essays exhibit the cruel nature of the demon by equating it with fascism. On one hand, the poor families are being driven away from their natural habitat. On the other hand, they have not been provided with any rehabilitation. The unhoused millions are forced to live in poor and unhealthy environment of either a rehabilitation camp or slums. “The Greater Common Good” gives a harsh critique of the fascist nature of privatisation. Roy says although they are not being taken to gas chambers, yet their accommodations are worse than the concentration camps built for Jews during the Third Reich. Their piteous condition “redefine the meaning of liberty” (Roy 2019, 34). The construction of Bargi Dam submerged 162 villages. Many people died of starvation in the rehabilitation camp situated in Gorakhpur. People were forced to either living in the forests or slums in Jabalpur. Some of them are forced to live under the constant threat of floods or outbreak of numerous diseases.

The selected essays posit the question of natural resources’ ownership such as: “Who owns this land? Who owns its rivers? Its forests? Its fish?” (Roy 2019, 27). Roy exhibits the true nature of

privatisation by asking these rhetoric questions. Although, the simple answer is that all the resources belong to the people of the Narmada valley including *Dalits* and *Adivasis*. Therefore, the terms 'ownership' and 'belonging' are not here used in terms of market or monetary value. It stands for those social ecosystems that are responsible for the maintenance of natural ecosystems at large. The poor people have not been only displaced from their land, resources and other means of livelihood by the dam-building industry. However, the communities have been broken which, in return, altered their customs and lifestyle.

### **Inequality and the process of 'Othering'**

The term 'equality' was popularised by French and American revolutions. However, it emerges as an umbrella term, which comprises of various social, economic, cultural and political inequalities in modern era. Raymond Williams states that the persistence of economic inequalities in the system of capitalist ownership of means of production has made social and political equalities merely abstract. The serious contemporary argument now more focussed on socio-cultural inequalities and marginalisation based on one's colour of skin, caste, gender, ethnicity and other cultural practices. In the similar way, the concept of 'othering' can be defined as any reductive action of labelling and defining a person as a subaltern native, as someone who belongs to the socially subordinate category of the other. The practice of 'othering' means to exclude and displace the people from the centre of a social group to the margins of the society.

Arundhati Roy puts forward various nuances of the very process of 'othering' in her essays. She ponders over the question that how a large number of people displaced by various developmental projects are either *Dalits* or *Adivasis*. In the case of Sardar Sarovar Dam, the displaced tribal people are comprised of 57.6 percent of the total.

Altogether it opens a new dimension to the injustices done by neo-liberalism and privatisation. Roy says, “The ethnic ‘otherness’ of their victims takes some of the pressure off the nation-builders” (Roy 2019, 33). The ethnic otherness of *Dalits* and *Adivasis* adds on to their exploitation. This is how neo-liberalism and privatisation – by joining hands with the pre-existing forms (race, caste and ethnicity) of oppression – marginalises ‘other’ communities and groups. In a village named Jalud, twelve families (most of them were *Dalits*) have been displaced in 1985. They were tortured in a very inhumanly manner to get their lands by pouring cement into their water pipes and bulldozing their crops. All of them were left landless to become wage labourers in metropolis cities. They are compensated indiscriminately in comparison to other displaced people who belong to the upper strata of society.

Another important index of identity – gender – and its complex relation with other social and political identities is also discussed in Roy’s essays. Moreover, an understanding of gender identities has become more crucial in the modern world. For instance, considering it from the point of view of otherness, tribal women are an easy prey for capitalists. Whereas they are bound to pay a fixed sum of money to an *Adivasi* man, they need not to give any kind of compensation to a tribal woman. Roy says, in one of her essays, “A cash compensation, to be paid by an Indian government official to an illiterate male *Adivasi* (the women get nothing)” (Roy 2019, 33). Revolutionary *Adivasi* Women’s association is fighting at two levels: against the patriarchy in their own community and displacement caused by mining corporations. However, this association is considered ‘other’ by mainstream feminists’ movement. On the one hand, they are doubly oppressed because they are marginalised on the basis of class and gender. On the other hand, if a woman belongs to a lower caste, it further adds to her suffering.

Kimberle Cranshaw, an American critical race theorist, describes how various systems of oppression overlap to create distinct experience for people with multiple identity categories in her theory of Intersectionality in 1989. *Dalits, Adivasis* and women belong to these multiple identity categories. They are exploited not only because they are poor, but also because of their caste and gender status. Intersectional feminist criticism analyses the overlapping systems of discrimination that women face due to their sexuality, economic status and ethnicity. In the same way, Roy's essays brings to light that how modern capitalist world has enhanced these people's exploitation by adding a new economic status of 'class' with the already existing categories. This paper critically looks into the nature of these ambiguous identities, because they overlap and intersect one another further adding to their pain and suffering.

## **Conclusion**

To sum up, privatisation, as a significant component of neo-liberalism, has adversely affected hundreds of poor and marginalised people. Various development projects have taken control over their lands and resources. The changed economic ties and patterns have altered their cultural practices and customs. In case of tribes, it is even more significant because they have been an important part of Indian civilisation since ages. Their livelihood has been adversely affected by a number of dams, mining and other power projects in India. Roy's essays clearly portray a pathetic image of their sufferings and oppression. She combines her style as a novelist with her strong commitment to social justice in composing these eloquent and penetrating essays. As Stanly Johny defines the nature of her essays “. . . inflamed prose, gritty distrust of power and moral commitment to the oppressed make these writings stand out as a gospel for the forsaken” (Johny 2019, 1). Thus, the essays originate from Roy's response to various pressing social, political, intellectual

and artistic demands of contemporary times. She is engaged with many aspects of modern culture and political set up in order to give up fresh insights of the prevalent discourses of the past few decades continuing to the date. In the context of Roy's essays, this paper critiques various capitalist forces which are at work in promoting inequality, injustice and marginalisation of millions of people from past five decades through in-depth study of selected essays.

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