

AGAINST COMPASSIONATE MISREADING: ARUNDHATI ROY, ADIVASI DISPOSSESSION, AND THE POLITICS OF REFUSAL

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ABSTRACT

Indian criticism has largely received Arundhati Roy's writing on adivasi dispossession as the protest of a conscience — a novelist moved by suffering, faulted chiefly for excess. This paper argues that the reception is a misreading, and that the misreading is doing political work. Roy's essays on Bastar and on mineral extraction hold a consistent left position: that the dispossession of adivasi India is not a failure of governance but the ordinary operation of capital, with the state acting as its instrument. Three bodies of evidence are read here — the property argument running through Walking with the Comrades and Broken Republic, the attack on philanthropic capital in Capitalism: A Ghost Story, and the assault on Gandhian reformism in The Doctor and the Saint. Each is a refusal of reform rather than a demand for it. The paper tests the claim against the strongest counter-readings, including the charge that Roy has no programme and no party, and argues that constancy of object, not doctrinal fidelity, is what the description requires. Reading Roy as a conscience disarms her admirers and lets her critics avoid the argument she is actually making.

Keywords: Arundhati Roy; adivasi dispossession; postcolonial critique; left politics; mineral extraction; Bastar

In April 2006, addressing the chief ministers of the states worst affected, Manmohan Singh described the naxalite problem as “the single biggest internal security challenge ever faced by our country”. That formulation has governed Indian policy discussion ever since. It has also framed the way Arundhati Roy's writing on central India gets read, because her essays are treated as the sentimental objection to that formulation rather than as a rival account of what is happening in the forest.

This paper argues that they are a rival account, and a recognisably left one.

The claim needs stating carefully, because it is easy to make it sound either trivial or abusive. It is not news that Roy holds left opinions; her critics have said so for sixteen years, usually as a complaint. What is argued here is stronger and more specific. Across the adivasi writings there runs a single analytic position: that dispossession in central India is not a malfunction of Indian governance but its designed operation, that the state is best understood as the instrument through which mineral wealth is transferred to private capital, and that remedies pitched at procedure — better compensation, cleaner tenders, more honest ministers — mistake

the machine for its breakdown. That position is not humanitarian. It is a claim about ownership, and it belongs to the left tradition whether or not Roy files the paperwork.

The stakes are not biographical. If Roy is read as a conscience, her arguments need no answer, only a temperament check; and her admirers, who like the conscience, are relieved of the duty of defending the politics. Both sides get to skip the argument. That is what a misreading is for.

THE RECEPTION PROBLEM: TEMPERAMENT IN PLACE OF POLITICS

The most influential Indian criticism of Roy is also the most revealing about this displacement. Ramachandra Guha's essay of November 2000, published in *The Hindu* under a title chosen to sting, already names her as of the left. What it disputes is not her politics but her conduct: the exaggeration, the self-dramatisation, the preference for the absolute claim over the qualified one. Guha returned to the charge a few weeks later. In both pieces the complaint is that a good cause is being damaged by a bad method.

Notice what the complaint concedes. It grants that the cause is good, and it grants the political label in the title itself. Argument then proceeds entirely on the ground of style, which is where Roy is least interesting and her opponents most comfortable.

There is a further fact that makes the displacement visible, and it does not appear to have been much remarked. In 2007 Guha joined Nandini Sundar and E. A. S. Sarma as a petitioner in the public interest litigation against Salwa Judum, the state-backed vigilante formation in Chhattisgarh. The Supreme Court decided the matter on 5 July 2011, holding the appointment of tribal youth as special police officers unconstitutional, ordering the militia disbanded and the firearms recovered, and warning of the danger of armed groups operating "under the veneer of State patronage". Roy's account of Salwa Judum in *Broken Republic* says, in substance, what the petition said.

So the quarrel between Guha and Roy is not a quarrel about the facts of Bastar. Both parties hold roughly the same facts. Guha, who litigated, wanted the militia dismantled and the constitutional order restored; that is a reformist demand, and it succeeded, at least on paper. Roy wants something the Court could not have granted and would not have understood as a request. The disagreement is about whether the state that ran Salwa Judum is a good instrument temporarily misused, or a bad instrument working normally. That is a political disagreement, not a temperamental one.

Western criticism has read her more generously and, in one respect, no more precisely. Rob Nixon, in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, places Roy among the writer-activists whose task is to make visible a harm that is dispersed, attritional and eventless. The account of the form is excellent, and this paper borrows it. But a theory of visibility is silent about content. It explains why Roy writes as she does, and it leaves entirely open the question of what she wants, which is the question her Indian critics also decline to answer.

THE SUBSOIL: DISPOSSESSION AS THE ORDINARY WORKING OF CAPITAL

The argument that runs beneath the essays is narrower than their fury suggests, and it concerns property.

Indian law places mineral wealth under the state. The adivasi lives on the surface and, since the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act of 2006, may hold a recognised claim to that surface. He holds nothing whatever to the bauxite beneath the hill he worships. Roy's whole case follows from the distance between those two facts. The state need not conquer anyone to take the ore. It need only maintain that the ore was never his, which was settled long ago, and then negotiate a price for the surface.

Put that way, the position is falsifiable, which is more than can be said for most polemic. It also has a lineage. What Roy describes is closer to accumulation by dispossession than to any human-rights account of displacement, and the difference matters: a human-rights account asks whether the taking was fair, while Roy asks who was permitted to own the thing in the first place.

The colonial continuity she insists upon is usually dismissed as rhetoric, and in its strongest form it deserves to be. Independence was not merely a change of personnel; universal franchise and the abolition of zamindari are not nothing, and an argument that waves them away has stopped arguing. But there is a narrower version that is harder to answer, and it is a version about statutes rather than about metaphors. Acquisitions proceeded under the Land Acquisition Act of 1894 until 2013. The Indian Forest Act of 1927 still governs. Eminent domain over minerals passed from Crown to Republic without interruption. For the adivasi specifically, the instruments of dispossession survived the transfer of power almost intact, and it is that survival, not a general analogy between empires, which earns the postcolonial vocabulary its place here.

The most instructive test of the argument is a judicial one, and it cuts against Roy in a way her admirers have not noticed.

Indian law already contains a doctrine adequate to her purpose. In *M.C. Mehta v. Kamal Nath*, decided in 1997, the Supreme Court held that the common law we inherited carries the public trust with it, and that "the State is the trustee of all natural resources", which are meant for public use and cannot simply be converted into private ownership. Jayanti Alam pressed the doctrine's practical edge in *Economic and Political Weekly* in July 2004, arguing against the privatisation of water under a title that states her position without ornament: "Water, Not for Private Ownership". The reasoning did not stay with water. On 25 August 2014, a bench headed by Chief Justice R. M. Lodha declared every coal-block allocation made through the screening-committee route since 1993 arbitrary and illegal, and on 24 September it cancelled 214 of the 218 blocks, sparing four and imposing a levy of ₹295 per tonne on coal already extracted. By then the Comptroller and Auditor General had placed the presumptive loss at ₹1.86 lakh crore in the final report tabled in Parliament in 2012. The Court's language about natural wealth belonging to the nation, and about its having been distributed as though it belonged to a few, could have been lifted from Roy.

The remedy was auction. Not restitution, not community ownership, not consent: a better market. That same logic had produced the same answer for spectrum in February 2012, when the Court cancelled 122 licences and directed that such resources be sold competitively in future.

This is the shape a successful counter-narrative takes when it meets an institution capable of absorbing it. The Court did not refute the trusteeship premise; it accepted the premise and drew from it a procedural conclusion. Where the earlier allocation was scandalous because it was corrupt, the auction is unimpeachable because it is transparent, and the adivasi standing on the surface of the block occupies exactly the position he occupied before, save that the company displacing him has now paid a fair price to the exchequer and can say so in court. Roy's essays have almost nothing to say about this. They were written against corruption, and corruption turned out to be the arrangement's most disposable feature.

The point for the present argument is what her position rules out. A liberal critic of the coal allocations wanted honest auctions and got them. Roy wants the question of ownership reopened, which no procedural remedy can deliver. That is the difference between a reformer and something else, and it is not a difference of degree.

AGAINST REFORM: THE FOUNDATION, THE NGO AND THE MAHATMA

If the property argument establishes the position, two later works establish that Roy holds it deliberately and knows what it excludes.

Capitalism: A Ghost Story, published by Verso in 2014, spends much of its length on an unlikely target for a humanitarian writer: humanitarianism itself. Roy's argument there is that the great philanthropic foundations, and the professionalised non-governmental sector they have funded, are not a counterweight to corporate power but one of its instruments — that they absorb dissent, convert political demands into fundable projects, and produce a class of managers whose careers depend on the persistence of the problems they administer. She calls the period after 1991 the era of “the Privatization of Everything”, and the essay reads philanthropy as part of that privatisation rather than as relief from it.

A liberal critic wants better foundations. Roy argues that the foundation form is doing what it was built to do. Whatever one makes of the claim, its structure is unmistakable: it is the left critique of the non-profit sector, and it is not available to anyone who thinks the trouble is that good institutions have been captured by bad people.

The second work makes the refusal of reform explicit on the terrain where Indian public life is least tolerant of it. In 2014 Navayana published an extensively annotated edition of B. R. Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste*, edited by S. Anand, with an introduction by Roy titled “The Doctor and the Saint”. The essay reads Gandhi's record on caste and race as indefensible, tracks his South African years for the formation of those views, and sets against him an Ambedkar whose materialism and constitutionalism it treats as the more serious inheritance. Its governing claim is that no other revolution in India is possible without a Dalit revolution first.

Attacking Gandhi is not, by itself, evidence of anything except nerve. What matters is the grounds. Roy does not fault him for insufficient radicalism of temperament; she faults him for offering moral reform where the situation demanded the destruction of an economic and social order. That is precisely Ambedkar's charge, and it is a structural charge.

Honesty requires recording that the intervention was contested from the left as well as the right. Dalit activists published an open letter questioning the propriety of a savarna writer introducing Ambedkar's text, and the pricing of the edition, and the attention the introduction drew relative to the speech it introduced. Those objections are not answered here. They are relevant for a different reason: one does not receive that kind of letter for holding a conscience. One receives it for taking a position inside a live political argument, on contested ground, with something at stake for the people already occupying it.

THE GUERRILLA QUESTION: A REFUSAL OF EQUIDISTANCE

The sharpest evidence is also the most awkward, and any honest account of these writings has to begin with what Roy actually did.

She went into the forest. *Walking with the Comrades*, published by Penguin in 2011 and collected with two further essays in *Broken Republic* the same year, is an account of weeks spent moving with an armed Maoist formation in Dandakaranya. The essay does not observe the guerrillas from a safe distance and then deplore both sides. It travels with them, eats with them, and represents their reasoning at length and largely without irony.

A humanitarian writer, confronted with a war between an elected state and an armed insurgency, adopts equidistance. It is the position's defining move and its chief comfort. Roy declines it, and the refusal is not casual: her essays consistently withhold from the Indian state the presumption that its violence is legitimate merely because it is legal. Once that presumption is withheld, the two parties in Bastar become comparable, and comparison is exactly what the security formulation quoted at the outset is designed to prevent.

Such a position carries costs, and there is no reason to minimise them here. Maoist cadres killed civilians, executed suspected informers and recruited the young. Roy's essays register some of this and decline to make it the frame, which is a choice rather than an oversight, and a reader is entitled to find the choice indefensible. The point is that it is not the choice a conscience makes. A conscience condemns violence wherever it finds it; that is what consciences are for. Withholding condemnation from one party because one has judged the conflict's structure is a political operation, and Roy performs it deliberately and at some professional cost.

Two scholarly corrections belong here, and they cut against her. Nandini Sundar's *Subalterns and Sovereigns*, an anthropological history of Bastar published by Oxford University Press in 1997, and Felix Padel and Samarendra Das's study of the aluminium chain in Odisha, *Out of This Earth*, published by Orient Blackswan in 2010, are built from years in the field. Roy's essay is built from weeks in the company of one party to a war. Where the accounts diverge on

the relation between the guerrilla movement and the villages it claims to speak for, the fieldwork should be preferred. Roy is a witness with a position, and her value is not that of a disinterested observer, because she is not one and has never claimed to be.

THE CASE AGAINST THE THESIS

A characterisation that cannot state its own defeat conditions is not an argument. Three counter-readings deserve an answer.

The first is doctrinal. Roy belongs to no party, submits to no organisational discipline, and proposes no programme; her prose contains no theory of transition and no account of what should replace the arrangement she attacks. On the older definitions, that disqualifies her. She is better described as an anti-statist romantic, closer in temper to anarchism than to any Marxism, and the forest she writes about functions in her work partly as an image of a life outside the market rather than as a site of production.

The second is thematic. Her writing on Kashmir turns on self-determination and on the conduct of an occupying army, which is a nationalist grammar rather than a class one. A writer whose commitments were primarily economic would not distribute her attention as Roy distributes hers.

The third is the sharpest, and it comes from her allies rather than her opponents. Sundar litigated for years and produced an anthropological history; Padel and Das traced an industrial chain from mine to smelter; Roy produced essays. Holding anti-capitalist views in print is not the same as holding a politics, and a description that collapses the two flatters the writer at the expense of the people doing the work.

The first two objections seem to me to establish something narrower than they claim. They show that Roy is not a Marxist in the doctrinal sense, which no one need dispute. They do not touch the claim argued here, because “staunch” describes constancy of object, not fidelity to a school. The object of Roy’s critique has not moved in almost twenty years: private capital, and the state understood as the instrument through which public wealth reaches it. Dams, nuclear weapons, mineral leases, foundations, the Gandhian settlement — the targets change and the analysis does not. Consistency of that kind, maintained under sustained public attack, is what the word is ordinarily used to name.

What would falsify the reading? A demand from Roy that is genuinely procedural, and pitched as sufficient — a call for better compensation, honest tendering, stronger regulators, offered not as a first step but as the remedy. It is worth searching the essays for one. This reader has not found it.

The third objection is a fair rebuke and is accepted, with one qualification. Division of labour is not hierarchy. Sundar’s fieldwork and Roy’s essays are not competing bids for the same office, and the Salwa Judum litigation drew its public force from an argument that writers had

been making outside the court for years. The rebuke should be aimed at readers who mistake the essay for the ethnography, which is the misreading this paper has been describing in another form.

CONCLUSION

Reading Roy as a conscience is comfortable for everyone concerned, and that comfort should itself arouse suspicion.

It permits her critics to conduct the argument on style, where they are strong and she is vulnerable, and to leave the property claim untouched. It permits her admirers to enjoy the prose while declining to defend the politics that produced it. And it permits the wider public discussion to treat adivasi dispossession as a problem of compassion — of how much we should mind — rather than as a question about who owns the subsoil, which is the question Roy has been asking since the Narmada essays and which nobody has yet answered on its own terms.

If the reading argued here is right, three things follow. Roy's writing should be assessed as political argument, with the tools appropriate to that, rather than praised or scolded as sensibility. The criticism directed at her, Guha's included, should be understood as a dispute between reform and refusal rather than between rigour and excess, which would make it a more interesting dispute and a harder one to win. And the recent judicial victories over resource allocation, which look from a distance like vindications of everything Roy has said, should be recognised as something closer to the opposite: an institution that accepted her premise about public trusteeship and used it to build a cleaner market.

She has been arguing about ownership all along. India has been answering about procedure. Until that mismatch is named, the argument cannot even begin, and both parties can go on believing they have already had it.

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