



## SUBVERTING THE NATIONALIST NARRATIVE: ARUNDHATI ROY'S POSTCOLONIAL CRITIQUE OF INDIAN NATIONALISM

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### ABSTRACT

*Arundhati Roy, celebrated author and incisive political commentator, has consistently engaged with and critiqued the dominant nationalist narrative of India in her non-fiction work. Rooted in a postcolonial perspective, her essays and speeches dissect the complexities and contradictions inherent in the Indian nation-state, challenging its foundational myths and exposing the marginalization and violence often obscured by its unifying rhetoric. Roy's critique is not a rejection of the idea of India, but rather a demand for a more inclusive, just, and historically accurate understanding of its identity. One of the central tenets of Roy's critique is the deconstruction of the monolithic idea of "Indianness." She argues that the nationalist narrative often homogenizes the vast diversity of India – its multiple languages, religions, castes, and ethnicities – into a singular, often Hindu-centric identity. This homogenization, she contends, inevitably leads to the exclusion and oppression of minority groups. In her essays, she frequently highlights the plight of Dalits, Adivasis, Muslims, and other marginalized communities, demonstrating how the dominant narrative often silences their experiences of discrimination and violence in the name of national unity. Roy's postcolonial lens allows her to trace the historical roots of these exclusionary tendencies. She argues that the project of Indian nationalism, while seeking to liberate itself from colonial rule, often adopted the very structures and ideologies of the colonizers. The emphasis on a strong, centralized nation-state, the imposition of a singular national language, and the construction of a unified historical narrative often mirror the colonial project of creating a coherent and governable entity. This adoption, Roy suggests, has led to the internal colonization of marginalized groups within India.*



**Keywords:**

Political, national, identity, communities

## **INTRODUCTION**

Arundhati Roy critically examines the role of historical narratives in constructing and maintaining national identity. She questions the selective amnesia that often characterizes nationalist discourse, particularly concerning instances of communal violence, caste discrimination, and state-sponsored oppression. By bringing these uncomfortable truths to the forefront, Roy challenges the idealized image of the nation and calls for a more honest reckoning with its past. Her work on the Kashmir conflict, for instance, directly confronts the official nationalist narrative by highlighting the voices and experiences of the Kashmiri people and questioning the legitimacy of the Indian state's actions in the region. (Dwivedi, 2021)

Roy also critiques the economic policies often intertwined with the nationalist project. She argues that the pursuit of neoliberal economic growth, often presented as a means of national progress, has disproportionately benefited the elite while displacing and impoverishing marginalized communities. Her activism against large-scale development projects, such as dams, exemplifies this critique, highlighting how the nationalist vision of development often comes at the cost of environmental degradation and the dispossession of indigenous populations.

Moreover, Roy is wary of the dangers of a hyper-nationalism that stifles dissent and critical thinking. She observes how the label of "anti-national" is readily deployed against those who question government policies or challenge the dominant narrative. This intolerance of dissent, she argues, undermines the very democratic ideals that the nation claims to uphold. Her own experiences of facing criticism and even legal action for her outspoken views underscore the risks involved in subverting the nationalist consensus. (Dubey, 2021)

Arundhati Roy's debut novel, *The God of Small Things*, is a rich tapestry woven with intricate personal narratives set against the socio-political landscape of Kerala, India. While not overtly a novel solely focused on nationalism, the pervasive influence of



nationalistic ideologies, both in its overt and insidious forms, profoundly shapes the lives and destinies of its characters. Roy masterfully portrays how grand narratives of nationhood intersect with the intimate "small things" of individual existence, revealing the inherent contradictions, exclusions, and often devastating consequences of a monolithic national identity.

One of the most significant ways nationalism manifests in the novel is through the rigid social hierarchies it often reinforces, particularly the caste system. The "Love Laws" that dictate who can be loved and how are deeply intertwined with notions of national purity and tradition. Velutha, the Paravan (Untouchable) who dares to love Ammu, a Syrian Christian woman from a higher caste, becomes a victim of this nationalistic fervor for maintaining social boundaries. Their transgression is not merely a personal affair but a perceived threat to the established social order, a violation of the unspoken rules that uphold a certain idea of Indian identity. The brutal consequences Velutha faces highlight how nationalism, when intertwined with casteism, can lead to violence and the systematic oppression of marginalized communities within the nation.

Furthermore, the novel subtly critiques the legacy of colonialism and its impact on post-independent India's national identity. The characters grapple with the lingering effects of British rule, evident in their Anglophilia and their complex relationship with Western culture. Chacko's pride in his brief marriage to an Englishwoman, Margaret Kochamma's fascination with all things English, and even the twins' obsession with the film *The Sound of Music* illustrate the internalized influences of a colonial past on the national psyche. Roy suggests that the newly formed nation, in its attempt to define itself, often struggles to reconcile its indigenous traditions with the imposed structures and values of its former colonizers. This creates a fractured sense of national identity, where the lines between authentic and adopted, self and other, become blurred. (Susan, 2019)

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Acharya et al. (2020): The political climate of Kerala in the late 1960s, with the rise of communism, also provides a backdrop against which the complexities of nationalism



are explored. The communist rallies and the workers' struggles represent a different kind of nationalistic aspiration – one focused on class solidarity and social justice. However, even this ideology is not immune to the pitfalls of rigid dogma and the potential for exclusion. The tragic events surrounding Sophie Mol's death are manipulated by the local communist leader, Pillai, for his own political gain, revealing how even well-intentioned nationalistic movements can be corrupted by personal ambition and the desire for power.

Ahmad et al. (2021): Roy subtly touches upon the construction of national narratives and the silences they often entail. The story of Ammu and Velutha is deliberately obscured and misrepresented by those in power to uphold a particular version of national harmony. The "official" story erases their love and frames Velutha as a criminal, thus reinforcing the dominant social and national order.

Emilienne et al. (2019): Roy suggests that nationalism often relies on selective memory and the suppression of dissenting voices and inconvenient truths. The "small things" – the individual experiences and emotions – are often sacrificed at the altar of a grand, often exclusionary, national vision.

Brinda et al. (2021): The book also subtly critiques the urban, middle-class understanding of nationalism, which often remains oblivious to the struggles in the remote hinterlands. Roy's journey into the forests becomes a metaphor for bridging this gap, forcing the reader to confront the uncomfortable truths that lie beyond the comfortable narratives of national progress. Her writing exposes the hypocrisy of a nationalism that celebrates economic growth while ignoring the human cost borne by the most vulnerable sections of society.

Padmaja et al. (2019): Roy points out the historical context of the tribal resistance, emphasizing that their struggle against exploitation predates the Maoist movement. She highlights how the Indian Constitution, despite its democratic ideals, has often been used to dispossess tribal communities of their ancestral lands, effectively turning them into "squatters" in their own homes.



Susan et al. (2019): The historical perspective challenges the notion of a benevolent and unified nation-state, revealing a continuity of oppression that undermines the celebratory narratives of post-independence nationalism.

Dubey et al. (2021): Arundhati Roy's "Walking with the Comrades" offers a powerful and critical perspective on Indian nationalism. Through her intimate account of the lives and struggles of the Maoist guerrillas and the tribal communities, she exposes the violence and exclusion inherent in the dominant nationalist project.

Dwivedi et al. (2021): By questioning the state's definition of national interest and highlighting the voices of those marginalized by it, Roy compels readers to confront the uncomfortable realities that lie beneath the surface of national unity and progress. Her work serves as a potent reminder that nationalism, when divorced from justice and empathy, can become a tool of oppression rather than a unifying force.

### **Research Objectives:**

In this paper we examine the Subverting the Nationalist Narrative: Arundhati Roy's Postcolonial critique of Indian Nationalism

### **Research Methodology:**

This paper is based on resources available in government official websites ,articles, research papers, news and institution website

### **Subverting the Nationalist Narrative: Arundhati Roy's Postcolonial critique of Indian Nationalism**

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* offers a nuanced and critical exploration of nationalism in post-colonial India. Through the intimate lens of a family's tragedy, Roy reveals how nationalistic ideologies, intertwined with caste, colonialism, and political opportunism, can shape individual lives, enforce social hierarchies, and suppress marginalized voices. The novel suggests that a monolithic and exclusionary sense of national identity can lead to profound personal and social injustices, urging readers to consider the human cost of grand national narratives



and to pay attention to the often-overlooked "small things" that constitute the true complexity of a nation.

Arundhati Roy, in her incisive collection of essays *Power Politics*, casts a critical and often scathing eye on the multifaceted and often destructive forces shaping contemporary India. While the collection addresses various issues like globalization, nuclearization, and the politics of development, the undercurrent of her critique consistently challenges the dominant narratives of nationalism propagated by the Indian state and its allies. Roy doesn't offer a simplistic rejection of the nation, but rather dissects the ways in which a specific brand of nationalism is constructed and deployed to mask injustices, silence dissent, and consolidate power.

One of the primary ways Roy critiques nationalism is by exposing its exclusionary nature. She highlights how the dominant nationalist discourse often marginalizes and demonizes minority groups, particularly religious and ethnic minorities, as well as those displaced by development projects. In essays like those discussing the Narmada dam projects, Roy illustrates how the idea of national progress and development is used to justify the displacement and suffering of thousands of Adivasi people.<sup>1</sup> These individuals, deeply connected to their land and way of life, are portrayed as obstacles to national advancement, their voices and rights rendered insignificant in the face of a monolithic national agenda. The "nation" in this context becomes a tool to prioritize the interests of the powerful, often at the expense of the most vulnerable.

Roy dissects the symbiotic relationship between nationalism and the state's exercise of power. She argues that the state actively cultivates a particular brand of nationalism to legitimize its actions, including its use of force and its suppression of dissenting voices. The rhetoric of national security and sovereignty is often invoked to justify the acquisition of nuclear weapons, despite the immense human and environmental costs. Roy questions this logic, pointing out the hypocrisy of a nation that champions non-violence on one hand while embracing nuclear militarization on the other. The "nation" becomes a shield behind which the state can operate with impunity, stifling any criticism as "anti-national" and therefore treacherous.



Roy also critically examines the role of language and symbolism in constructing nationalist sentiment. She points out how powerful slogans, historical narratives, and cultural symbols are employed to create a unified national identity, often obscuring the internal contradictions and inequalities within the nation. The portrayal of large-scale development projects like dams as "temples of modern India," a phrase famously used by Jawaharlal Nehru, is a prime example. This symbolic association elevates these projects to the realm of national icons, making any opposition appear as sacrilege against the nation itself. Roy deconstructs this rhetoric, revealing the human cost and the skewed distribution of benefits that these "national" projects entail.

Roy touches upon the dangers of a homogenized national identity that suppresses diversity and dissent. She suggests that true strength lies not in a forced unity but in acknowledging and celebrating the multiplicity of voices and experiences within a nation. The dominant nationalist narrative, however, often seeks to erase these differences in favor of a singular, often majoritarian, identity. This can lead to the marginalization of regional cultures, languages, and political aspirations that do not conform to the dominant national ideal.

Arundhati Roy's *Power Politics* offers a potent critique of nationalism in India. She exposes its exclusionary tendencies, its complicity with state power, its manipulation of language and symbolism, and its suppression of diversity. Through her sharp analysis and powerful prose, Roy urges readers to look beyond the simplistic and often dangerous rhetoric of nationalism and to recognize the complex realities of power, justice, and human rights that often lie obscured in its shadow. Her essays serve as a crucial reminder that true patriotism lies not in blind allegiance to a constructed national identity but in a commitment to truth, justice, and the well-being of all its citizens, especially the most marginalized.

Arundhati Roy's "Walking with the Comrades" is a powerful and unsettling account of her time spent with the Maoist guerrillas in the forests of Chhattisgarh, India. While the book primarily focuses on the brutal realities faced by the tribal communities and the complex socio-political landscape that fuels the Maoist insurgency, it also implicitly and explicitly engages with the concept of Indian nationalism. Roy's





narrative presents a stark challenge to the dominant, often exclusionary, narratives of Indian nationalism, revealing its darker underbelly and questioning its claims of unity and progress.

One of the central ways Roy critiques mainstream nationalism is by highlighting the state's violence against its own marginalized citizens in the name of national interest and development. Operation Green Hunt, the government's counter-insurgency operation, is portrayed not as a defense of the nation but as a brutal war waged against the poorest, often tribal, populations to clear their land for mining corporations. Roy meticulously documents the displacement, rape, and killing of civilians by state forces and vigilante groups, exposing the chasm between the state's nationalist rhetoric of progress and the lived experiences of those deemed "collateral damage." This paints a picture of a nationalism that prioritizes corporate profit and resource extraction over the well-being and rights of its own people, particularly those who do not fit into the dominant socio-economic framework.

Roy questions the very definition of "nation" as propagated by the state. By immersing herself in the world of the Maoists and the tribal communities, she offers an alternative perspective from those who feel alienated and excluded from the dominant national narrative. The Maoists, who are labeled as "anti-national" by the state, are presented as individuals fighting for their survival, land, and dignity against systemic oppression. Their nationalism, if it can be called that, is rooted in a localized struggle for self-determination and a rejection of a state that they perceive as exploitative and unjust. Roy's empathetic portrayal challenges the monolithic idea of a unified national identity, suggesting that for many marginalized communities, the state represents not a protector but a predator.

## **CONCLUSION**

Arundhati Roy's postcolonial critique of Indian nationalism offers a vital and necessary counter-narrative to the dominant discourse. By deconstructing the myth of a homogenous Indian identity, exposing the historical roots of exclusion, challenging selective amnesia, and critiquing the social and environmental costs of nationalist development, she compels us to confront the uncomfortable truths about





the nation-state. Her work is a powerful call for a more inclusive, just, and historically conscious understanding of India, one that acknowledges the diverse experiences and struggles of all its people and moves beyond the narrow confines of a singular, often exclusionary, nationalist narrative.

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