

**Literature as a Vehicle of Social Change: An Analysis of  
Arundhati Roy's Writings**

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**Abstract:**

The paper presents discussion of literature as a medium of social change and examines one of the literature makers, Arundhati Roy. Her fictional and non-fictional works are characterized by a critical analysis of socio-political structures, and examine questions of identity, inequality, state power and resistance in the present day of India.

The study examines the use of narrative, symbolism and political criticism by Roy to expose the institutionalized inequalities like caste oppression, exploitation by business houses and corporate entities, environmental pollution and religious nationalism. She is an artist who combines literary aesthetics and activism, and also makes literature an active player in public consciousness.

Moreover, the paper examines the effects of the works of Roy on readers and its ability to have empathy, critical thinking and a sense of ethical responsibility. Her writing is not only about social reality, it also calls into question and resistance, adding to the social discourse of change. Lastly, this analysis argues that literature is a malleable medium for contesting power and making alternative visions of power possible.

**Keywords:** Arundhati Roy, Contemporary Indian Literature, Narrative as Activism, Caste, Identity, Resistance.

**Introduction**

Literature is a medium of reflection and reshaping of society with critical perspectives on structures of power, identity and resistance. It is not only about art, it is about a strong message, a message that challenges dominant ideologies and shapes social change. Arundhati Roy, born on 24th November 1961, and is a renowned Indian author, activist and public intellectual whose works have greatly influenced in the field of literature and social justice. Her writings are remarkable in the context of contemporary Indian literature for their

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sensitivity towards the pressing social-political issues such as caste oppression, gender inequality, state violence and global capitalism.

Roy's works are a combination of fiction and non-fiction making it difficult to tell the difference between fiction and activism. Her novel 'The God of Small Things' (1997) was the Booker Prize winner, is about the rigid caste and class system, and its seepage into personal human relationships. The story is also extended to 'The Ministry of Utmost Happiness' (2017), where the story has been expanded to include characters from other groups, such as transsexuals and political dissenters, in order to expand the scope of the story and explore issues of identity and belonging in world's increasingly complex socio-political climate.

Roy's non-fiction is more forthright, polemical and challenging, confronting systems of power and exposing the complexities of politics, economics and social injustice. Her works 'My Seditious Heart' (2019) and 'Capitalism: A Ghost Story' (2014), demonstrates her dedication to tackling issues such as corporate power, environmental destruction, and the deterioration of democratic principles. In these writings, Roy not only captures social realities, but also attempts to develop social discourse, to question and envision another social future.

This paper sets out to analyze literature for the purpose of social change by critically analyzing Roy's selected works. It analyzes the ways in which her stories assert themselves as voices of the voiceless, challenge the dominant and raise the readers' moral and political consciousness. The study situates Roy's texts in the broader field of postcolonial theory, resistance literature and subaltern studies, and argues that literature can help us better understand society, be engaged in it and, perhaps, change it.

### **Background Of The Study**

Literature has been described as a reflection of the society, and in history, it has been a reflection of the human experience in a particular culture, political and economic context. It has had the power to represent and it has also worked as a powerful instrument in contesting dominant ideologies and expressing alternative perspectives. From the resistance stories of the colonized to the current arguments and discourses on globalization and inequality in the present day, literature has been a major factor in shaping people's awareness. In the Indian context, literary works have played an important role in bringing up a variety of issues such as casteism, gender discrimination, socio-political marginalization and so on that have been associated with social change processes.

However, in the past few decades, literature and activism has returned in fashion, particularly through the lens of those who are directly facing political realities. Among all of them, Arundhati Roy is one of the most prominent who has her works in both art and activism. Her work is a reflection of her longstanding interest in questions of justice, identity,

and resistance and is a wonderful subject of discussion about literature as a means of social change. As Roy herself states, “There’s really no such thing as the ‘voiceless’. There are only the deliberately silenced or the preferably unheard”. (Foundation)

### **Relationship Between Narrative And Power**

Narrative and power is the heart of literature as a medium of social criticism. Narratives are not a-political, but they do contribute and help to create power. They determine who will be heard, who will be included, and who will be recognized as a storyteller. In this respect, literature can be characterized as a space of contestation, a space in which power is consolidated and contested.

Theories have paid attention to the fact that power is expressed through discourse, as, for example, by Michel Foucault, and to the role of narratives in the production of social realities. Literature has that power, in the sense that it can present an alternative discourse to challenge norms and ideologies in the dominant discourse. Literary texts can engage in challenging the legitimacy of the existing social structure by showing how power works, and by showing the experiences of the marginalized community.

Furthermore, the conventions of narration can be used to assert authority as a way of establishing a dominant voice and master narrative, or they can also be employed as a means of resistance to challenge the dominant voice and to open up space for alternative readings. The process of literature as a reflection of power and negotiating in power is an active process. As Michel Foucault observes, “Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere”. (Foucault)

There is a significant role of the writers in influencing the consciousness of the people as their work affects the perception and understanding of social realities by their readers. The political and social issues can be used to challenge prevailing perceptions and to provoke thought. They make lived reality and public discourses intertwine, making sense of the complexities as narratives with broader resonance.

The writer has a duty to tell a story and he/she has an ethical and political responsibility. As writers engage with questions of inequity, injustice, and/or marginalization, they contribute to a critical, informed public. Their works can be used for raising awareness, for promoting empathy and for motivating action, which can be important to social change.

The influence of writers is not limitless, and would differ based on the reception of their works and the socio-political situation of their production. However, books still have a strong power in which ideas can flow and challenge the hegemonic paradigm.

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This theory may be linked to Arundhati Roy's works, and may be widely accepted as an example of the merging of literature and activism. Her approach to her work is political, involving overt concerns with resistance, inequality and power, making her a storyteller and political commentator.

Roy's works of fiction like 'The God of Small Things' emphasize the impact of social inequalities on the lives of people. The novel's disjointed narrative and multiple perspectives make it challenging to tell a story, which encapsulates the challenges of remembering history, dealing with trauma, and social oppression. In turn, 'The Ministry of Utmost Happiness' extends this narrative technique to many silenced voices, and allows for other forms of identities and belonging.

Her non-fiction is also rooted in her passion for literature as activism. As a direct attack on state power, corporate control, and socio-economic inequality, the works 'Capitalism: A Ghost Story' and 'My Seditious Heart' are direct critiques of the mechanisms of power. The two pieces with the titles 'Capitalism: A Ghost Story' and 'My Seditious Heart' are a direct assault on the dynamics of power: state power, corporate control, and socio-economic inequality. In these works, Roy not only examines the power structures that already exist, but also calls upon people to have a critical awareness and to protest them. Roy thus merges the literary with the political, and symbolizes the power of the literary as a medium for political criticism. Her practice demonstrates how the power of narrative to represent reality might be used to change it, to influence discourse, and to engage in an ongoing struggle for social justice.

### **Representing Caste, Identity And Inequality**

The issues of caste, identity and inequality continue to be the key parameters in understanding of the socio-political context of India. Literature is a medium which reflects and criticizes social relations and it is an important medium to reveal the deeply embedded hierarchy in social relations. In this regard, Arundhati Roy's writings are interesting as they investigate such themes, particularly in the context of caste oppression and the marginalization of subaltern voices. She explores the interplay between personal experience and the political in her narratives along with how caste is ubiquitous in India and has a profound impact on identity and social injustices.

Roy carries out a sophisticated critique of caste in 'The God of Small Things' as it is an ongoing and deep-rooted system of social stratification that affects not only public life, but intimate human life as well. The novel takes place in Kerala, and portrays the social stratification that governs the relationships of people, particularly that of Ammu and Velutha, the "untouchables". (Roy)

Their rebellious love turns into a space of opposition to the caste norms and the consequences are fatal, but they have to face them – it shows how social boundaries are violently enforced.

Roy's story exemplifies the hidden and systematic nature of the caste system, how it affects people's lives, and how it is responsible for maintaining inequality. The Love Laws (who should be loved, how and how much) is a good metaphor for the internalization of social hierarchy. Roy's discovery of the normalization and inter-generationality of a caste system of oppression is achieved by the fractured narrative and through the voices.

Besides, the novel is a very clear illustration of how the institutions (family, religious and state) interact in their effort to sustain a system of caste discrimination. Velutha's case is representative of the systemic violence that befalls those who challenge the status quo, and his silence, of society's complicity in perpetuating inequality. Roy not only exposes caste as a social system, but does a bit of a psychological and emotional expose of the nature of caste. The non-fiction essay collection 'The Doctor and the Saint' (2017) by Roy treats the issue of caste in a more direct and polemical way than 'The God of Small Things', which is narratively and symbolically focused. In 'The Doctor and the Saint', Roy critically analyzes the clash between B.R. Ambedkar and M.K. Gandhi in the context of the importance of the caste issue in Indian society and politics.

Roy counters the prevailing narratives of nationalism that tend to ignore the importance of caste oppression. She foregrounds Ambedkar's criticism of caste and explains how a critique of the caste system becomes a task rather than a reform. The collection of essays critique the moral and political institutions that have shaped contemporary India, and casts doubt on the ones that fail to recognize caste-based oppression as an important source of oppression.

In this writing, Roy places herself in the history of resistance literature that seeks to reclaim histories and voices of the margins. Her association with Ambedkarite thoughts brings attention to the need to eradicate the caste system before attaining social justice. The essays call for critical reading and political consciousness, rather than empathy for the marginalized characters. (Roy, *The Doctor and The Saint: The Ambedkar-Gandhi Debate: Caste, Race, and Annihilation of Caste*)

One of the important themes in Roy's work on caste and inequality is the relationship between self and society. Individual experiences are inextricable from the socio-political structures, either in fiction or non-fiction. In 'The God of Small Things' characters are not only people but are also the expression of social forces that affect the characters' lives. The constraints of caste, gender and class are as integral to Ammu as are her own decisions.

In a similar fashion, in 'The Doctor and the Saint' Roy explores the formation of identity in political rhetoric. The struggle against caste oppression is not a mass movement; it is an individual movement for the oppressed. Roy brings the personal to the political by drawing to the viewer's attention the idea that without structures of power there is no identity.

This is an illustration of the all pervasive nature of caste - personal and political. It also places in the foreground the potentialities of literature to relate the individual experience with the collective one; to make abstract issues more concrete and familiar. One of Roy's strengths is her ability to be a voice for the voiceless. In 'The God of Small Things', Velutha and the other subaltern groups are denied agency and voice. It is a turbulent story to be read as a way to restore these unsung and unheard voices, to listen to their experiences that are sometimes overlooked or suppressed.

The enigma was certainly discussed in 'The Doctor and the Saint' when Roy protested against the Dalit voices being marginalized in history. She focuses on the voice of Ambedkar and calls into question the dominance of upper caste voices and a more inclusive history and society. The project of the recovery and amplification of marginalized voices is an important one in which she is involved in order to engage in literature as a field of social critique. 'Silencing' for Roy is not just the absence of voice, it is a consequence of the system of power relations. She reveals these dynamics and not only challenges the current inequalities but also opens up avenues for new stories to be told. Her writing is testament to the strength of literature as a tool for social critique, a discourse that has continued in relation to the concepts of justice, equality and transformation. As B.R. Ambedkar famously observed, "Freedom of mind is the real freedom. A person whose mind is not free, though he may not be in chains, is a slave, not a free man. One whose mind is not free, though he may not be in prison, is a prisoner and not a free man. One whose mind is not free, though alive, is no better than dead. Freedom of mind is the proof of one's existence". (Ambedkar)

### **Marginality And Resistance In Fiction**

The concept of marginality and resistance is at the heart of the literary discussion today, especially in fiction that attempts to put on the forefront of what is considered to be the dominant socio-political discourse voices that are in the margins. The fiction of Arundhati Roy offers a rich space to explore the relationship between literature and questions of identity, exclusion and dissent in this context. The novel 'The Ministry of Utmost Happiness' presents a nuanced image of the outcasts of society and tells several stories that challenge traditional ideas of belonging and nationhood. The novel, involving gender, sexuality, and minority identities, do not just demonstrate the ability of fiction to serve as a space of resistance and reimagining, but also serves as a space of resistance and reimagining.

'The Ministry of Utmost Happiness' emphasizes the figures that are at the crossroads of various margins. At the core of the story is the female-to-male transsexual Anjum whose life history challenges conventional notions of gender and identity. Anjum places Roy in the

Khwabgah, a group of hijras, to challenge and recalibrate the exclusion of society. This is an alternative description of gender binary and a focus on fluidity of identity.

There are also wider issues of minority life addressed, such as religious and political marginalization. Roy examines the structures of violence, surveillance, and exclusion through characters linked with the conflict in Kashmir, and the experiences of Muslim communities in India. As these stories show, it is never easy to belong to the dominant culture and politics.

Importantly, Roy does not limit marginality to being experienced as a victim. Instead, she highlights the agency and resilience of her characters as they engage in negotiation and resistance towards the forces that strive to silence them. In reclaiming these marginalized identities as sites of strength and resistance, the novel restores them to the political plane.

The narrative is another impressive aspect of ‘The Ministry of Utmost Happiness’, which is a resistance in itself. The novel is written in a non-linear style, using multiple perspectives and points of view to capture the complexities of the realities the characters are portraying. This disruption of the normal narrative can be viewed as a challenge to the normal ways of knowing, which tend to favor uniformity and co-ordination among thoughts and ideas over multiplicity and contradiction.

Roy takes different stories and makes them interdependent, so that they are not easily deciphered. Multiple voices and experiences challenge the authority of stories and allow other voices to be heard. This corresponds to the more general theoretical views of literature as a place where hegemonic discourses can be challenged and reframed.

Moreover, the juxtaposition of personal and political voices highlights the complex relationship between personal and political experiences and the interaction between people and institutions. In doing this Roy shows that resistance can be performed not only in the body of overt political action, but in the body of the story itself. The story is used to regain voice and presence when marginalized.

Moreover, Roy delves into the study of marginality in a way that is inextricably linked with his concept of the “emotional politics” of belonging. The novel’s focus is on the emotive aspects of exclusion, emphasizing the impact of emotions of loss, alienation, and longing on the experiences of marginalized people. It also highlights the processes and mechanisms by which alternative ways of community and belonging are formed in response to exclusion.

Jannat Guest House, founded by Anjum, is a symbolic space where people who are ostracized from mainstream society find refuge. (Roy, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*)

It is a different way of belonging that breaks through the traditional walls of belonging and provides a space of difference that is not only tolerated, but welcomed. This arrangement of community unsettles dominant ideas of “the nation” and “social order” and implies other ways of living together that are more inclusive and compassionate.

The emotional depth of the story also is essential in holding the reader’s interest. Roy draws the reader into the lives of the marginalized characters, making it easy to identify with their struggles and hopes. The political impact of this emotional engagement is an added layer to the novel, and it gives rise to the human experience of marginalization. In this context, the novel exemplifies the power of literature to evoke emotion, in order to raise awareness and promote social change. As bell hooks observes, “Rarely, if ever, are any of us healed in isolation, Healing is an act of communion.” (Watkins))

### **Critique Of Capitalism, State Power, And Globalization**

The linkage between capitalism, state power and globalization has become key components of the current socio-political debates. The use of literature, especially the non-fiction, has been an important way of challenging them, revealing the processes by which power is enacted and inequality maintained. The books written by Arundhati Roy are a constant critique of global politics, the state and neoliberal capitalism. In her pieces ‘Capitalism: A Ghost Story’, ‘The Algebra of Infinite Justice’ and ‘My Seditious Heart’, Roy situates literature in the realm of political action, offering a critique of the dominant discourses and a call for social justice and equality.

In ‘Capitalism: A Ghost Story’, Roy offers a powerful critique of the influence of corporate power on the economic and social landscape. She explores the intersection of wealth and systemic inequality, and she believes that today’s capitalism is played out in an influence network that extends beyond the marketplace into politics, media and civil society. Roy shows how corporate philanthropy can be used to legitimate inequality and doesn’t necessarily solve it. She illuminates structural imbalances, which enable the control of large resources by a small minority and enable large sections of the population to be marginalized, by analyzing the influence of powerful corporations and elite institutions. This is part of a wider critique of the ‘wealth of nations’ and of the loss of democracy in neoliberal economies.

Besides, Roy stresses the hidden nature of these power relations, and the fact that “capitalism works like a ghost,” invisible but ever present. The image of the “metaphor” emphasizes the subtle and sinister nature of economic domination, and a critical awareness and resistance. (Roy, Capitalism: A Ghost Story) Her critique of capitalism is intertwined with her study of state power, violence and inequality. In ‘The Algebra of Infinite Justice’ (2001), Roy explores how states justify and impose violence for the sake of security, development and national interest. Her essays discuss matters like nuclear policy,

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militarization and the global war on terror, exposing the paradoxes of contemporary democratic order.

She rejects the belief that democracy is a fair and equitable institution, on the contrary, it can seem as though it is a system of domination and control. She brings a sharp focus on case studies of state sponsored violence, bringing to the fore the chasm between the ideals of democracy and the reality of politics. Her research indicates that the state is not an impartial party, but rather often serves the interests of the corporate and the elite, thus perpetuating inequalities. It is an important criticism in the times of globalization, in which national policies are increasingly determined by transnational factors. Roy's analysis indicates the need for a reevaluation of state power and citizens' rights, as well as the need for accountability and resistance. (Roy, *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*)

'My Seditious Heart' is an extensive anthology of Roy's essays, which have been written over the course of many decades, that provides a wider lens on the effects of globalization on social and political life. The text is a reflection on various issues such as economic liberalization, environmental degradation and displacement of marginalized communities. Roy takes issue with the process of globalization which, at times, benefits business interests over people and thereby exacerbates inequality and social division. She studies the implications of the dispossession of vulnerable populations, especially indigenous and rural groups, in conditions of large-scale development projects supported by the state and corporate actors. Roy's analysis shows the human costs of economic development, a subject that is not debated in the dominant conceptions of development as modernization and growth. In parallel with this, it is a collection that foregrounds resistance as an act of response to these challenges. Roy chronicles the various forms of grassroots activism, showing how people and communities mobilize against oppressive structures. Thus she reiterates the notion that literature can be used as a tool to raise political awareness in readers, so that they are able to approach the world around themselves critically. (Roy, *My Seditious Heart: Collected Non-fiction*)

Her essays are not just descriptive but also attempt to move the public agenda for the reader by breaking open the prevailing ideology and offering an alternate point of view. Roy's analytical and rhetorical approach engages the reader in a process of critical reflection, challenging the systems of power. Her teaching style makes difficult concepts understandable and emotionally evocative, bringing critical thinking out of the classroom. Such democratization of knowledge is intrinsic to the transformative nature of literature, helping to foster access to discussions and dialogues about justice, equality and governance.

Furthermore, Roy's literary works emphasize the moral duty of the public intellectual. Her dedication to tackling important social and political concerns emphasizes the power of literature to influence individual opinion and collective consciousness. In this

respect, literature is not merely a mirror image of reality but actively involved in the struggle for change in society. As Noam Chomsky states, “It is the responsibility of intellectuals to speak the truth and to expose lies.” (Chomsky)

### **Literature as a Vehicle Of Social Change**

The most important part of literature in the process of social change is its ability to alter people’s thinking, and therefore their sense of responsibility for changing it. Literary texts are not only about the story; they engage the reader to do new things, to think about things differently, to question, to challenge, to rethink, to reconsider, to re imagine, etc. Literature is in this respect a feeling and thinking surface and space in developing empathy and critical awareness.

One such change is Arundhati Roy’s writing. Readers are transported in the intimate lives of people who have been formed by caste, gender and political violence in works like ‘The God of Small Things’ and ‘The Ministry of Utmost Happiness’. Roy reminds the reader how inequalities are experienced - not just thought about - and prompts the reader to consider inequalities as human condition, and not just an abstract concern. The emotional bond is also significant in raising awareness of the injustices and reflection on one’s contributions to the power structures as part of the process of ethical consciousness.

Roy’s non-fiction, such as ‘My Seditious Heart’, adds to this engagement by directly confronting political issues and encouraging its audience to be critical of prevailing narratives. Her essays are not meant to be read, but rather read again and again, with conscious and at times moral reflection. This is a narrative that becomes an argument, and understanding is never divorced from responsibility as Roy implies throughout the book. However, there is no guarantee or uniformity in the process of reader transformation. It will rely on the reader’s social context, preconceptions and ability to analyze critically within the text. However, literature opens up space for dialogue and self-reflection, thereby creating possibilities for such change. In doing so it helps to create the “informed, responsible citizenry” that is the subject of the title of this series.

### **Limitations And Possibilities Of Literary Intervention**

Literature has enormous potential for providing social criticism but there also needs to be an awareness of the extent to which it can intervene. One cannot change material reality or break apart established power structures with the help of literature alone. They are mediated by their interpretation, circulation and reception, through the broader socio-political contexts. Consequently, the power of literature in transforming the literature writer’s world is often indirect and it can affect attitudes and discourses, but not the structures in the world of the literature writer in an immediate way.

The work of Arundhati Roy is an example of literary interventions and their potential as a means of both explaining and challenging the constraints of such interventions. Her writings have helped to spike public awareness on issues like caste oppression,

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environmental degradation and state violence etc. which have helped to shape the public discourse. The fact, however, that these problems still exist shows also the inadequacy of literature to produce real change (without the help of action of the government and the people).

But to see these restrictions as flaws reveals a lack of understanding of the larger function of literature in forming collective consciousness. Literary intervention is situated in a broader circuit of culture, politics and society. Literature can also help to shift the dominant ideology and to give voice to the voiceless, contributing to a more gradual shift in how society thinks, which can then help to facilitate more tangible changes. Furthermore, literature is good at envisioning alternatives. By telling a story, writers are able to imagine a different way to arrange social life that is more just and inclusive, and to provide a means for reading and rethinking what is already happening. In this respect, literature not only acts as a criticism of the present but as a place for the imagination of the future.

Therefore literature's role in the intervention needs to be considered as limited but at the same time is able to expand with time because of its capacity to affect thought and discourse. The novels of Arundhati Roy illustrate the ways a literate text can be involved with pressing social questions and that it can recognize the difficulties of being involved in changing that situation.

### **Conclusion**

This study has critically analyzed the writings of Arundhati Roy for their role in bringing about social changes in society. In both her fiction and non-fiction writing, Roy shows how literature can transcend aesthetic expression, take on a political stance and act as a medium of social criticism. Throughout her career, her works have always brought to the fore the concerns of caste oppression, gender inequality, marginalization, state violence and corporate domination and challenged dominant socio-political narratives, raising the concerns of the marginalized communities.

Analysis of 'The God of Small Things' and 'The Doctor and the Saint' showed how Roy challenged caste hierarchy and how discriminatory inequalities are ingrained in the Indian society. She uses personal stories to connect to the political framework and shows how caste has an all-pervading effect on identity, relations and social mobility. Likewise, 'The Ministry of Utmost Happiness' explored the gender, sexual and minority aspects of Roy's work, focusing on issues of representation of the 'other', and imagination of alternative 'belonging'.

The study also focused on Roy's critique of capitalism and globalization through her writings like 'Capitalism: A Ghost Story', 'The Algebra of Infinite Justice' and 'My Seditious Heart' and her critique against state power. These texts show how, both economically and politically, inequalities are maintained and dissent voices are silenced.

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Roy's texts invite the reader to consider critically the structures which form the current society and the interrelatedness of local and global oppression.

One of the things that Roy has added to literature is her narrative techniques. Her deliberate employment of symbolism, non-linear narration, and multiple voices challenges traditional forms of narrative and represent the complexities of marginalized lives. The aesthetic decisions she makes echo her political ideals through her refusal to succumb to authorizing representational methods and by allowing for other meanings and voices. Her works involve a willingness to engage the reader on an emotional level and pose ethical questions in order to develop social awareness and critical consciousness.

This study has at the same time recognized the constraints of literary intervention. A book is not going to change a system and change material in the here and now. Its benefits, however, are related to its capacity to create or mold discourse, to change perception and to promote empathy and critical reflection. Literature can potentially help to change collective consciousness by challenging dominant ideas and voices, and highlighting the voices of marginalized communities.

In conclusion, the works of Arundhati Roy demonstrate the timeless importance of literature in today's world. Her works show that literature is not only a mirror image of the realities, but it is also an active participant in the struggle for justice, equality and human dignity. Roy's work on pressing socio-political issues is a testament to the literary expression as a force of questioning, resistance and social transformation.

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