



## NONFICTIONAL PROSE DISCOURSE AS THE POTENT MEDIUM OF DISSENT:

### A CRITICAL LOOK INTO THE SELECT ESSAYS OF ARUNDHATI ROY

AND TARIQ ALI

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## ABSTRACT

*Among all other forms of nonfictional prose, essay form contributes the most to today's socio-political scenario. The genre of essay in particular was launched into the vacuum of an effective medium, to deal with the pressing issues of the times. It soon became a popular vehicle, as its language is revolutionary in nature and closer to reality. Fiction relies on stories and imaginary plots, on the contrary, the language of essay is straight-forward, precise and to the point. It is purpose-driven and creates an impact by instigating immediate response in the minds of the readers and, in so doing, connects them to the issue. It is a far more serious form of writing. It weighs, judges, evaluates, questions and confronts*

*the status quo. Several writers like Arundhati Roy and Tariq Ali have resorted to this medium to dissent and to stand up against all totalitarian and oppressive forces displaying commitment to truth that is involved in the craft of writing. For them, to dissent is an act of courage and is part of the right to life. Today, nonfictional prose has evolved as prose media, a transition from the art world to the digital world. This paper seeks to analyse the importance of this genre in being an effective vehicle for dissent by bringing into its framework, the two tall figures, Arundhati Roy and Tariq Ali.*

**Keywords:** Nonfictional prose, Essay form, Dissent and Socio-political issues

Political writing in nonfictional prose is a new genre in the evolution of essay. It is an emerging branch that deals with politics, history, ethics, literature, journalism and criticism. Today, essay form is well developed and has evolved into political writing. The origin of essay goes back to Michel de Montaigne and Francis Bacon. It had travelled three hundred centuries undergoing numerous changes from its origin and has developed extensively. This paper seeks to highlight the way the modern essay form is written with serious argument, political, social and otherwise and serves as an effective tool of dissent. Especially, during the mid-twentieth century, different types of essays were written with different perspectives contributing to the developmental strides this genre has attained.

There is an inherent connection between the prose form and dissent. The form is an efficient tool to confront the contemporary issues that bring about great harm to the common people. Dissent is as important as life itself. Romila Thapar says, “Dissent is, in essence, the disagreement that a person or

persons may have with others, or, more publicly, with some of the institutions that govern their patterns of life” (Thapar 3).

Rupakshi Bagga, in her essay stated that modern essays have seven characteristics that distinguish them from the essays of the nineteenth century. These seven distinct characteristics include global emphasis in content, political tone, slogan based (discussing the impact of globalization, liberalization, privatization, gender equalization, world peace, democratic governance and disarmament issues), unbalanced one side supporters, use of harshness and arrogant language, less attention to correctness of language and suitability of the idiom, heavily laden with quotations by and large contemptuous in impression and impact. The modern essay predominantly deals with the current socio-political issues and problems that are related to the people in everyday situation. Today, these critical pieces of writing are in high demand because of the way it relates with the contemporary situation.

Modern political writing has created new rules and structures that bring with it certain amount of awareness among the ordinary people. The essayists take cognizance, analyse and reflect the current socio-political scenario and write in a way that creates awareness among the ordinary people. Twentieth century essay form has rendered great liberty for the writers becoming a successful method connecting society and the people. Essay form continues to evolve in order to be alive. Lectures on political issues, historical, literary and religious issues are printed in the form of an essay. The modern political writers understand and keep in view the evolution of the readers also. In the current technological and

globalized world, clarity and authenticity are expected. There is a need to include alternative views, take tough stands, present ideological issues and criticisms in a proper manner.

Though there has been a significant transformation, there is still a need for the upliftment of the critical inquiry of the readers. The genre contributes to this by capturing the truth in words and presenting it to the readers. It encourages the activity of serious reading and also promotes discussion among people. This paper attempts to show the way Arundhati Roy and Tariq Ali use such an essay form as a tool to dissent differently in their own way.

In the writing of Arundhati Roy and Tariq Ali, there is the global approach, slogan and political tone in their essays. These approaches are used in their essays according to the seriousness of the issue they are dealing with. Arundhati Roy and Tariq Ali concentrate on political matters and even on other minor events, bringing out the truth through their work. They have questioned the entertainment aspects that are present in any form of Art. They also question the concept of social energy as majority of the writers settle down in the social energy whereas only a few questions the same.

Both Roy and Ali try to talk about the issues that bother their own self and the society. Tariq Ali's books have great reputation throughout the world. He is a great admirer of Edward Said, Jean Paul Sartre and Bertrand Russell. Roy too is a great admirer of Gandhi, Ambedkar and the various other revolutionaries. All her works, both fiction and non-fiction carry the real sufferings of the marginalized people in India. She is critical about globalization and the autocratic powers wielded by the government

on its own people. She is a writer-activist fighting against the injustice meted out to the marginalized people.

Tariq in his two essays '*Natopolis*', '*Literature and Market Realism*' and briefly talks about the dominating culture of Americanism throughout the world. Tariq Ali conveys his opinion on the pressing issues of the times to the readers through his essays. His stay in 'New-Left review' helped him to approach literary works and political issues with greater maturity. Ali questions the modern capitalist world that seldom thinks about fellow human suffering in a distant corner of the world. Tariq Ali also tries to highlight the great political moves that were made by the world countries for their betterment.

Arundhati Roy fights against one of world's largest democracy-India, for its policies that harms poor tribes and farmers. At the very same time, there are policies of the government that simultaneously favor the big corporate houses. The two essays '*Capitalism: A ghost story*' and '*Nine is not Eleven and India is not America*' are against the power center. According to Ali, the basic reason to write non-fiction is to engage with the people. While an attempt is made to bring out the truth and give it to the people, there is always a certain group of people that may not accept that which is written as it hits out at the power center. People basically love and admire the power center since citizens are trained to be loyal and not to question the government. Both Tariq Ali and Arundhati Roy fight against this common practice of the majority, in order to keep them at vigil to fight against the corrupt and illegal

practices of the power center. Ali in an interview to University of California Television (UCTV) says, “If not engaged in challenging the lies of the system what is the use of living in the society”.

Ali breaks and clears such myths that prevail in the society. Roy too fights against the injustices carried out by the power center. She questions the practices of the government against the common man. She openly writes about the political games played by politicians in the name of development. The word progress is the mantra deployed by all the major politicians and political parties in India. This progress troubles its poor people to give away their land, wealth and even their very own life. In each and every activity of the power center there is an inner political meaning within itself. Arundhati Roy in her essay clarifies, “literature cannot exist no more and anything you write gets more fun fared” (Roy 154). Today the power center controls the media houses and brings out news that doesn’t harm them. She briefly talks about the control of media by the big-business houses in favor of government. Tariq Ali in an interview to University of California Television (UCTV) shares that “Media doesn’t allow its citizens to think, and the control of the Media houses are exercised on the people”.

Power centers perpetuate totalitarianism, imperialism and dictatorship. They wield immense power and exercise absolute control that makes its rulers powerful, richer and autocratic. It is the obligation of the artist to address such issues that demand immediate attention. And the essay form is the ideal medium for the same as it is truthful and straight forward. Hence, the writers like Arundhati Roy and Tariq Ali resort to the essay form to dissent and redress. The fight against this control is not that uncomplicated

since the exploitation and oppression is inconspicuous and not direct. Power centers are present in different forms and shapes, be it corporates or media. For example, public discourse and comprehension of relevant issues are manipulated by the governments through the media. Thus, only highly sensitive and aware individuals can understand these insidious practices. It is in this juncture that artists' role gains immense significance as they create a dialogue between the ones dissenting and those that are in power, as Romila Thapar opines, "one could well ask whether it is characteristic of such an age that there is a dialogue between those dissenting and those in authority (Thapar 9).

Writers like Arundhati Roy and Tariq Ali caution the people with their activisms and writings. In her work, *Capitalism: A Ghost Story*, Roy talks about capitalism touching upon several important issues and people. She writes, "Capitalism is destroying the planet. The two old tricks that dug it out of past crises-war and shopping-simply will not work" (Roy 181). According to Roy, this is the greatest kind of injustices that encompass the world we live in. In the end of the essay Roy, mentions about the Ambani's, 'Antilla'. Writers of her stature attempt to touch core issues that are prevailing in the society. In today's corporate culture, individuals need to be aware and clear about the issues that happen in and around them. Roy takes a stand against the capitalist groups which run most successfully in the country. The works of a writer of her caliber definitely brings its readers a step closer to reality. The essay 'Capitalism: A ghost story' could have been written as a short story but Roy decided it to be an essay in prose for a reason. As discussed earlier, the essay form is most suitable for serious issues such as these

but the fact that such serious content is written also in an aesthetically pleasing manner cannot be negated.

People who live in hot countries smell funny and don't use deodorant. My favourite deodorant is called freedom. It has a lovely lemony smell. I don't think funnily dressed people should have new cooler weapons. So those bombs in your cupboard-just hand them over folks. In the United States we don't keep bombs in our cupboards. Only skeletons tour favourite skellies have pet names. They are called peace, democracy and the free market. Their real names are Cruise Missile, Daisy cutter and Bunker Buster" (*Nine Is Not Eleven and November Isn't September* 115).

Here, Roy tries to bring out the primary motive of the American government to sell their military equipment and missiles to countries like India that is the world's second largest importer of defense machines. In the above lines, Roy mockingly writes about the American government. The US sketches a strategy to enter into other countries and the aspects could range from cold war, oil politics, to control of the sea etc. Their motives differ from context to context and country to country according to its needs. Roy draws a comparison where the American president compares the weapons and bombs to 'peace, democracy and free market'. As mentioned earlier, peace and democracy are the fruits of America and free market is a pure capitalist idea of sensualizing things.



Ali maintains an order in writing about the existence of power. Countries that do not even have a standing army are used in NATO operations for the military bases they provide to the developed countries. The European powers are very clear in their strategic defense operations in order to ostentatiously flaunt as powerful operators in tough military operations. So, NATO stands as a strong example. This co-operative body supports America in entering into any mission that is shown as a threat to the world. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization held an emergency conclave, the aim of the summit being to discuss about the strategies to deal with ISIS, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria; but beneath this primary concern there were other considerations. Should NATO prepare a rapid deployment force for it to send in a few thousand soldiers, commander backed by air power, whenever it was necessary to defend western interests and the global empire (*Natopolis*, 109).

Tariq Ali is very clear that even for the latest terror activities of ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) the western powers joined hands and carried out an attack over them. Mainly, they take precautionary measures to save their interests and their empires. With this kind of emergency situations, they try to alter their policy decisions accordingly, to their benefits. George Orwell in his essay 'Hanging' and 'Shooting an Elephant' talks about the imperialist regime that worries about its own country and never about the people that are enslaved. NATO behaves in a similar manner, because they are worried about the western interest in which they are involved. NATO is dictated by a power center for its own interest and displeasures. The existence of NATO is backed by America. So, both Roy and Ali, have meticu-

lously used the essay form to connect, relate and sensitize the society about indispensable matters that make or mar our existence in today's increasingly oppressive systems.

Both these writers use their artistic knowledge in their works which is highly or deeply soaked in political criticisms. Writers like Ali and Roy create a big awareness through their essays making people read and listen carefully about the issues that are discussed by them. The contemporary issues in the form of an essay makes the content relatable, clear and understandable to the readers. Thus, the issue-based writing creates a stir in the lives of people as it reaches the common man through this medium. Their efforts pay off as the minds of the readers are opened up. As Orwell says Political writing is very vibrant because "no work is free from political bias" (Orwell 6).

The essay form, thus has transformed into a tool of dissent from the entertainment purpose for which it was used before. This development clearly reflects the position of the genre as a vehicle of dissent in today's globalized world. The writers that concentrated especially on political writing resorted to the essay form as they had a serious motive of liberating the minds of the people. Also, Roy and Ali, feel that it is the duty of the artist, to question the totalitarian and oppressive power structures. For this purpose, the essay form has been utilized as a tool to dissent, disagree, question, deny, and confront the system.

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