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Contesting Contemporary Discourses: Reading of Arundhati Roy's The Greater Common Good and Amitav Ghosh's Countdown

Ibrahim Khalilulla M

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Contesting Contemporary Discourses: Reading of Arundhati Roy's *The Greater Common Good* and Amitav Ghosh's *Countdown*

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***Abstract:** Modern world is in the grip of various number of discourses that regulate our behavior, and made to feel good for us in near future. Similarly, establishment of Nuclear reactor, Building dams etc. are contemporary Discourses of India which makes to feel as the symbol of progress and development. But in reality they are helpful to certain few people by exploiting innumerable masses. Arundhati Roy in her non-fiction *The Greater Common Good* point out the author's rage against the government and the state authority to the sufferers of the big dam project of our country. Amitav Ghosh in his work *Countdown* ranks among the most moving responses to the nuclear tests conducted by the Indian government in Pokhran.*

Key Words: Contemporary Discourses, Critique of development, Narmada Bachao Andolan, Hyper-masculinist nationalism, Pokhran Nuclear project

INTRODUCTION

Modern world is in the grip of various number of discourses that regulate our behavior, and made to feel good for us in near future. Similarly, establishment of nuclear reactor, building dams etc. are contemporary Discourses of India which makes to feel as the symbol of progress and development. But in reality they are helpful to certain few people by exploiting innumerable masses. Worldwide struggle against neo-liberalism, US imperialism, US cultural hegemony, made many scholars and activist from a number of countries critiqued these Contemporary discourses. Amitav Ghosh and Arundhati Roy are such activist from India. The aim of this paper is primarily to evaluate some of Arundhati Roy's and Amitav Ghosh's intervention in current debates about globalization, American economic and foreign policy, Capitalist, Nuclear project etc.

Arundhati Roy is an iconic activist fighting for many causes. In contrast to the polyphonic language of her fiction, her discursive prose is rhetorical, polemical and at times overemphatic. She uses her prose writings as weapon in her crusade against genocidal communal politics, notions of progress and development which destroy ecology and recently the caste system. The overt purpose of her writings is to launch a sustained attack on such discourse and political actions.

Arundhati Roy is recognized as one of the most articulate and effective activist writers of post independent India. She has acquired a celebrity status which helps her to draw worldwide attention to the many causes she fights for. It has also earned her notoriety of being the most viciously attacked writer of our times. One of the reasons for this among many is that she writes to provoke a response and generate public debates. Her intention is also to create opinions in the civil society which can lead to the appropriate political action. To achieve this she fashions her prose into a formidable weapon, using rhetoric, satire, inventive and brilliant metaphors as arsenal. Her writing possesses the truly disturbing Swiftian energy capable of destroying hypocrisy, double speak and sham politics. Though her writings seem to be topical, recording her responses to

events and issues as they emerge from time to time, her ideological vision is well integrated and balanced. She uses her writings as a crusade against the development paradigm which supports ecological destruction and displacement of people through large dams and projects, the convergence of neo colonial corporate capitalism and communalism which pushes third world societies to self destruction. The very power of her arguments has prevented readers from appreciating the multiple styles and registers she employs in her prose and the variations in tone she manages superbly. Above all, there is a personal intensity and an imaginative vision which rescues her writings from becoming mere polemics and ideologically driven rhetoric. As she says in her essay on the Narmada Valley development project when she returned from her visit

I returned convinced that the valley needed a writer. Not just a writer, but a fiction writer. A fiction writer who recognised that which was happening in the valley was too vulgar for fiction, but who could use the craft and rigour of writing fiction to make the separate parts cohere, to tell the story in the way it deserves to be told. I believe that the story of the Narmada valley is nothing less than the story of modern India.

This is probably the best description of the role of Arundhati Roy's prose writing. In most of his prose writings Arundhati Roy persistently questions the link between the economics of globalization and India's struggle with legacy of colonialism. Arundhati Roy through her non-fictional writings has taken the role of activist.

In her non-fiction *The Greater Common Good* point out the author's rage against the government and the state authority to the sufferers of the big dam project of our country. The essay *The Greater Common Good* reveals the author's point of view to the dam projects of the government. The essay is based on factual plight of the people who are sufferers of the Narmada Valley Project. She is especially pained to find that no responsible person in power, not even the political parties have paid any attention to their loss without any chances of any gain. She thinks that nature and natural beauty along with a life style have been brought to naught by insensible human greed of a few. The essay opens with the bitter irony of the fact that even Supreme Court of the land, instead of looking into the vital human issues of existence, pays attention to trivialities like children's park, etc. in the settlement colonies to be established for the displaced persons who are forced to move out from the catchment area of the dam. While crossing the Narmada she came to see the tribals and their little world and was pained to realize that even the Supreme Court has chosen to look the other way round of the interest of the tribals. She could not repress her smile at the irony of the situation. She might takes up the issue because she could not tolerate the isolation, inequality and the potential savagery of it. She realizes that the majority of the people in India just know nothing about the sufferings of Adivasis who account for about sixty per cent.

In the essay the author shows how the tribal people are not happy at all in the resettlement colonies because these colonies are far from the sky to which they have been accustomed so far. They are deprived of their age long myths and traditions and natural gifts where it was easy for them to get their food and other things of life. The tribal people were very happy in their villages and dwelling places where they belong. They might be given big house to live in, big fields to play but as a matter of fact it is not a real sympathy with them. They can never forget their birth place. However poor and miserable the man's home may be, he is emotionally lined to it that through all his life he cannot forget the memory of the place where he is born. So essay shows that Roy is not in favour of big dams because they are no more monuments of modern civilization but they show man's superiority over nature.

Roy knows that in the Narmada Projects so many State Governments are involved and their track records in the field of rehabilitation and resettlement of the suffering tribals have been far from satisfactory. Villages are separated from their clans and families and virtually nothing is being done to put them together. The tribal life has been a strange sense of togetherness. So in practice the settlement plan is haphazardly executed making the problem just beyond redemption as the poor people have lost their homes. In fact the tribals are running from pillar to post. The whole process is dehumanized because India's poorest people are subsidizing

the lifestyle of her richest. So Roy severely criticized the validity of the 2:1 split verdict of the Division Bench of the Indian Supreme Court on 18th October 2000 in favour of the construction of the Sardar Sarovar dam. Roy had to face the contempt of court act for having staged a protest outside the Supreme Court. In the essay she writes “For the Narmada and all the life she sustains”. Roy points out the absurdity of the tender concern with which the Supreme Court judges in Delhi had enquired whether tribal children in the resettlement colonies would have children’s park to play in before vacating the legal stay on further construction of Sardar Sarovar dam. In all these she questions validity of our democratic government, concept of progress in construction of dams. Arundhati Roy’s critical focus on the work of the Narmada Bachao Andolan made her as the public voice of India’s anti-globalization movement, and social concern with environmental and economic infrastructures. Roy’s role in resisting the Narmada development in ways that might complicate or contest the notably ungendered and deracialized discourse on activism against globalization and exemplifies alternative sites of resistance.

Amitav Ghosh the most substantial and serious writer of fiction today is also a fine writer of discursive prose. Most of his prose creates a counter discourse and critique the National and European knowledge. For example his brief but powerful account of India’s nuclear tests in *Count Down* is a remarkable work. It creates a counter discourse to critique the aggressive masculinist enrephonia which celebrated India’s nuclear power. It also interrogates the scientocracy which obstructs the proper discussion of nuclear power in Indian Civil society. His work *Countdown* ranks among the most moving responses to the nuclear tests conducted by the Indian government in Pokhran. It is also considered as one of the finest anti-nuclear tracts of our times. Combining powerful narrative strength with thick descriptions and interviews Ghosh examines the nature of a self destructive politics and hyper-masculinist nationalism which seek to celebrate India’s nuclear power. He also provides the Pakistani perspective on nuclear power thereby leading to a critique of fundamentalism and euphoric nationalism in south Asia. His detailed portrayal of what could happen if Delhi were to be attacked with nuclear weapons is probably the most chilling account of a possible nuclear dystopia. He concludes the work with the following words:

The pursuit of nuclear weapons in the sub-continent is the moral equivalent of civil war; the targets the rulers have in mind for these weapons are in the end, none other than their own people.

Countdown was written in response to testing of nuclear weapons in India and in Pakistan respectively in the summer of 1998. The events evoked a sense of euphoria among the ruling classes in Pakistan and in India alike, although an articulate segment of activists, intellectuals and artists in both these countries immediately indicted their governments’ decision to formally participate in the nuclear arms race in imitation of the more ‘developed’ nations. The irresponsible and callous manner in which the capacity of the bomb was being exploited, by the ruling political parties in the major countries of the Indian sub-continent-India and Pakistan-merely for political aggrandizement, shocked most of the conscious intelligentsia in this part of Asia, making them react to the nuclear tests in Pokhran and Chagai, conducted in 1998. The question therefore rises, as to how people are thinking about the necessity of the very existence of the nuclear bomb. Ghosh’s *Countdown* is the product of much editing and condensing of a large body of interviews and interactions Ghosh had in the aftermath of the Pokhran tests on 11-12 May 1998, followed by the Chagai tests on 28 and 30 May 1998. The deceptively slim volume actually arrests an entire gamut of what the knowledgeable elite were thinking in the light of the explosions which tested the nuclear bomb. The opinion-quest spanned the intelligentsia of India, Pakistan and even Nepal, highlighting the views of not less than eighteen person. *Countdown*, a small book of 106 pages with 13 unmarked chapters exposes the nuclear lobby in India as well as Pakistan. It is a spontaneously written book.

The occasion of writing it is India’s nuclear explosion test on 11 May 1998, followed promptly by the Pakistani tests. Ghosh visits Pokhran in Rajasthan, the site of tests, Siachen glacier at India-Pakistan border and then finally Pakistan. He talks to many people and forms his impressions on nuclear testing. People of Pokhran

are full of grief and sorrow when they recount their horrendous and horrifying experiences regarding nuclear testing. Ghosh feels that reasons behind this nuclear testing are not related to the security of either nation. It is indeed sad to note that our region is dominated by 'stunt' politics, which seldom cares for the peace and prosperity of people. The author went Pokharan three months after the tests. The book opens with an apocalyptic vision of the Pokharan site. Ghosh openly satirizes the celebration held to celebrate the great day. Party workers and sympathizers distributed sweets to people. They even talked of sending dust from Pokharan to different parts of India as sacred soil. They wanted to build a sort of a monument of strength at the site. Even the Prime minister is not left unscathed by Ghosh. 'On 15 May, four days after the test a celebration was organized on the craft left by the blasts. The Prime Minister was photographed standing on the crater's ruin, throwing flowers into the pit. It was as though this were one of the crowning achievements of his life'(6). But people in and around Pokharan are not happy for obvious reasons.

Manohar Joshi, one of the first journalists to know about the tests, says, 'In the years after 1974 there was so much illness here that people didn't have money to buy pills. We had never heard of cancer before in this area. But people began to get cancer after test. There were strange skin diseases. People used to scratch themselves all the time'(7). Many other people of Pokharan tell Ghosh about the birth of deformed children, growth of tumor in cows and birth of blind and deformed calves. It is so tragic to learn how politicians, be it in 1974 or 1988, for their selfish interests, play with the lives of people. As one parliamentarian tells Ghosh that the explosions were done to save the government from exploding from within; to quiet voices of dissent from within the coalition government. Still, many sleep in this, country without food. Floods and famines are a regular feature. There is no comprehensive plan to deter these annual natural calamities. All that we are doing is adding to them by nuclear calamities. All that we are doing is adding to them by nuclear testing. For one single battle tank, one hundred schools could be opened in rural areas. And yet our annual defense budget is well above thirty five thousand crores or rupees. Nuclear weapons are not military weapons' (13). Ghosh goes on to prove that these tricks are nothing but post colonialism of the perverted order. The fifty years of unfulfilled promises, the frustration of not being able to realize potential, the growing corruption-all these find a temporary atonement in such exercises. Two hundred years of colonization India has lost national cohesion. With loss of self-esteem, the bomb has become a symbol of self-esteem. It is the global currency with which India wants to be a player, a manipulator of the international order. But according to Ghosh, India's nuclear programme is like minting false coins to purchase 'world-wide influence'

The message is clear that we can become influential only by sorting out our real problems like population, poverty, unemployment and corruption and not by these cheap stunts. Ghosh uses the discussion to show the wrong direction of our decolonization. For him, it only symbolizes the complexive mindset of the still not mentally decolonized people of India. The bomb is a false symbol of re-arrangement of global power, a political insurgency or any kind of millenary movement. His writings always depicted double standards shamelessly followed by the controlling powers of the world. But here he takes an introspective look. He is viewing Indians rather ruthlessly. Ghosh also describes the condition of soldiers deployed in very difficult places like Siachen Glacier, Leh, Ladakh and Suronk. Nature is indeed cruel at these places. With rising hostilities on the border these soldiers face the double threat of natural calamities on one hand and bullets on the other. The cost of maintaining these soldiers at these places is again shocking. Ghosh appears to evade a full confrontation with the policy-makers, offering instead, glimpses of existing perceptions of nationhood those of governments and the governed. In all these Ghosh is convinced that there is not, and never was a social consensus in India or in Pakistan regarding the bomb. The bomb, he believes, is an elite imposition on the masses of the two countries, mass opinion being more or less in opposition to the bomb. As such, according to Ghosh, the bomb experiments were an anti-people enterprise on the part of the national elite of either country.

CONCLUSION

Roy's role in resisting the Narmada development in ways that might complicate or contest the notably ungendered and deracialized discourse on activism against globalization and exemplifies alternative sites of resistance. Countdown is different from many other essays against the nuclearization of South Asia in that it attempts to connect the conflict between countries to the conflict within them. And although the conflict within countries is more complex than a straight-forward face off between the elite and the masses, each of them a monolithic and monochromatic body of population, the crucial core of Ghosh's argument remains: that the nuclearization of Indian sub-continent has been carried out despite, and in fact against, the will of the majority of its people. In one of her statement Arundhati Roy states that it is unfortunate for novelists to have to take to writing about current issues, she is referring to the mammoth task voluntarily taken up by people like Amitav Ghosh and herself –the responsibility of upholding to the common reader, the implications of nuclear power, dam construction against self-seeking politicians/Governments who mislead people with false development discourses.

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