

Arundhati Roy: The Story of a Fearless Writer Who Stood Against Injustice

From the Booker Prize to the Narmada Movement, from Kashmir to the Forests of Tribal Communities

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*Some people make history not by birth, but through the way they live. **Arundhati Roy** is one such person a Booker Prize-winning novelist, a fearless political thinker, the voice of tribal struggles, and a rebellious consciousness that has never bowed before power. Her story is not merely the biography of a writer; it is the tale of a spark of fire that was lit on the banks of the Meenachil River and continues to blaze across the world even today.*

Born on 24 November 1961 in Shillong, Meghalaya, Suzanna Arundhati Roy's very birth seemed to occur at the confluence of two opposing worlds. Her father, Rajib Roy, was a Bengali Brahmo Samaji from Calcutta who managed tea plantations. Her mother, Mary Roy, was a Jacobite Syrian Christian from Kottayam district in Kerala, a fierce activist who dedicated her life to women's rights. Two different cultures, two different religions had come together. When Arundhati was barely two years old, her parents separated, and her father's shadow disappeared permanently from her life. In one interview, she had said,

"In Kerala, everyone has their tharavad, their ancestral address. Whoever has no father has no tharavad. I was someone who had no address at all."

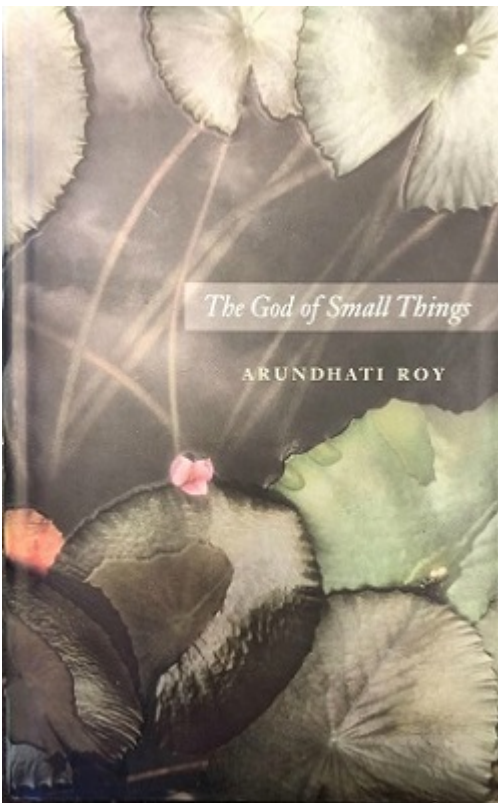
Her mother returned to Kerala with the children. After living for a while with her grandfather in Ooty, Tamil Nadu, the family finally settled in the small village of Ayemenem in Kottayam district, on the banks of the Meenachil River. This village, surrounded by rubber and banana plantations, with the fragrance of its flowers, the songs of fishermen, and the invisible yet keenly felt weight of the caste system, all of this took deep root in Arundhati's mind. It was this very red soil that later found its place in the pages of *The God of Small Things*. Mary Roy, her mother, was a militant social activist. She single-handedly challenged the Travancore Christian Succession Act in the Supreme Court a law that denied Syrian Christian women the right to inherit their father's property and won. This victory proved to be a turning point in the lives of millions of women. But Arundhati's relationship with this very same strong-willed woman was extremely complicated. Her mother was an inspiration, yet this same duality has been candidly and compellingly portrayed by Arundhati in her 2025 autobiographical book, *Mother Mary Comes to Me*. "She is woven into me," she wrote in it. This book made it onto the New York Times' listings and won the National Book Critics Circle award in the autobiography category.

At the age of 16, Arundhati left Ayemenem and set out for Delhi. She took shelter in a small room with a thatched roof on the grounds of Feroz Shah Kotla and supported herself by

selling empty bottles. This was a life of poverty, but it carried within it a certain kind of freedom. She then studied architecture at the School of Planning and Architecture in Delhi. It was here that she formed her first relationship, with architect Gerard da Cunha, which later ended in separation. In 1984, her life became intertwined with film director Pradip Krishen, and in the world of cinema she also worked as a screenwriter and actor.

In 1995, Arundhati stirred up the literary world with her essay “The Great Indian Rape Trick,” about Shekhar Kapur’s film *Bandit Queen*. Her question whether permission had been obtained from Phoolan Devi before depicting on screen the inhuman sexual violence committed against her was a morally unsettling one. The commercial exploitation of a victimized woman’s pain, she stated directly, was not art. A case was filed against her, but she did not stop writing.

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And then came the moment that would be recorded in golden letters in the history of world literature. Published in 1997, *The God of Small Things* was a poetic anguish that unfolded against the backdrop of the village of Ayemenem in Kerala. Through the childlike eyes of twins Estha and Rahel, the loneliness of their mother Ammu, and her love for Velutha, an untouchable carpenter, through all of this, Arundhati brought to light the dark inner corners of the caste system. The “Love Laws” what happens when you do what is not permitted to be done in love form the soul of this novel. The rights to this book were sold simultaneously in 21 countries, the writer received an advance of half a million pounds, and Arundhati Roy made history as the first Indian woman to win the Booker Prize. To this day, this novel has been translated into more than 40 languages.

On the night of the Booker Prize, Arundhati donated 26,000 pounds of the prize money to the Narmada Bachao Andolan. Through this act, she conveyed the message: the world may be ready to call me a celebrity, but I will not lose myself in that glitter. In India, however, the book’s reception was mixed. Some Marxist leaders in Kerala criticized the romantic

passages in the novel, and accusations of obscenity were made but through all this storm, Arundhati remained unshaken.

After the Booker, Arundhati Roy did not remain confined within the golden cage of “literary celebrity.” She came down onto the streets, into the forests, onto the banks of the Narmada. For two decades, she gave priority to political and ideological writing over fiction. Through books such as *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*, *Power Politics*, *Walking with the Comrades*, and *Broken Republic*, she exposed the corporate forces plundering tribal lands, the repression of the state, and the truths concealed by the mainstream media.

Her relationship with the Narmada Bachao Andolan was not merely that of a writer, it was that of a fellow traveler. She stood shoulder to shoulder with Medha Patkar, and she herself lived through the anguish of the villages being submerged by the Sardar Sarovar Dam. When she publicly criticized the Supreme Court’s verdict, a contempt of court case was filed against her. In 2002, she was sentenced to one-day imprisonment and fined 2,000 rupees. The court had offered her the opportunity to apologize, but Arundhati refused. She accepted the prison sentence, not the apology.

On the question of Kashmir, Arundhati Roy’s stance has always been one that generated intense controversy. In October 2010, her speech at a seminar titled “Azadi The Only Way” in New Delhi led to a complaint being filed and an FIR being registered. The case lay dormant for 14 years. Then, in June 2024, Delhi’s **Lieutenant Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena** granted permission to prosecute Arundhati Roy and former Kashmir University professor Sheikh Showkat Hussain under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA). This law, normally used against terrorists, being wielded against a literary figure was seen as a symbol of an attack on freedom of expression. More than 200 intellectuals and journalists across the country demanded the withdrawal of this sanction, and the United Nations Human Rights Office also called upon India to withdraw these charges.

In the very same month that the Indian government granted permission for prosecution June 2024, she was also awarded the prestigious PEN Pinter Prize 2024, an honor given to a writer who views the world with an unwavering and fearless gaze. Earlier, in 2004, she had received the Sydney Peace Prize, along with many other international honors. But she views awards with a certain kind of “patronizing” suspicion — she believes that once system grants recognition, a writer’s freedom gradually begins to erode.

After a wait of nearly two decades, her second novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, arrived in 2017. Through the parallel stories of Anjum, a transgender woman who builds a home in an old graveyard in Delhi, and Tilo, an architect, Arundhati painted a harrowing portrait of modern India. The open wounds of Kashmir, and the anguish of Muslims, transgender people, and Dalits, people rendered homeless in the name of “nation-building” were depicted in this novel. It was placed on the longlist for the Man Booker Prize, and she never once compromised on a creative person’s social responsibility. When German director Wim Wenders said at a film festival that artists should not involve themselves in political questions, Arundhati immediately resigned from that festival’s jury. She could not accept an atmosphere that opposed commentary on the war in Gaza. For Arundhati, an artist shirking their responsibility is something fundamentally intolerable.

Her language is as extraordinary as her thinking. It is like a river, sometimes calm, deep, and transparent, sometimes swift and unexpectedly pulling you along. Her sentences carry a rhythm that is not found in prose alone, there is poetry within it too. A love for small

things, an intimacy with forgotten faces, and a pure rage against power, all three flow together through her pen. Today, at the age of 64, Arundhati Roy stands before the world as a living question mark. The girl who once watched the world with open eyes on the banks of the Meenachil River, the young woman who sold empty bottles in Delhi, the woman who fought for those displaced by the dam on the banks of the Narmada — that same woman today stands calmly beneath the sword of the UAPA, and continues to write. Because she knows that the pen is her only weapon, and this is her identity. She continues to write for forgotten, erased people, for marginalized voices and that is why Arundhati Roy is not just a person, but a consciousness, a voice, and indeed, a rebellion itself.

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