

lecture

## 'I give you my book in memory of Velutha'

This is the English original of Arundhati Roy's translated Malayalam address to the Dalit Sahitya Akademi at Kozhikode on January 15, 1999:

MR. Prabhakaran and Mr. Mukundan came to my home in Delhi to invite me on behalf of the Dalit Sahitya Akademi to Calicut. I was delighted and accepted their invitation at once. I cannot tell you how flattered and honoured I am to be here. Flattered and honoured enough to be making the first speech of my life. I promise you that it will be a very short one. My book, *The God of Small Things*, has had a very noisy journey into the world. Like other books, it has been praised and criticised, loved and sometimes hated. Amidst the din of this peculiarly 20th century personality cult around authors, people often remember the writers and forget their books. The reason that I am thrilled to be here is because I'm sure that this will not be the case with you. I know that you share the anger and outrage which lies at the heart of *The God of Small Things*. It is an anger that the "modern" metropolitan world, the Other India (the one in which I now live), tends to overlook, because for them it is something distant, something unreal, something exotic. But you, better than anyone else, know that there is nothing unreal or exotic about barbarism.

I have come for a very simple reason. I believe that the Dalit struggle for justice and equality in a society wracked by caste prejudice is going to be, and indeed ought to be, the biggest challenge that India will face in the coming century. It cannot be ignored, it cannot be disguised or given another name or re-fashioned to fit some pre-existing theory. It must and will be recognised for what it is. I am fully aware that this

particular war will be an immense and complicated one. That it will be waged in all sorts of ways, by all sorts of people, in all sorts of places. I'm here to enlist.

Here we are, poised to enter the twenty-first century, arming ourselves with nuclear bombs and medieval values. It's 1999 and we still read of whole villages where Dalits have been annihilated - shot, or burned to death. It's 1999 and we still have people persecuted, even beheaded, for marrying outside their caste. It's 1999 and we still have words in our vocabulary like 'scheduled tribe' and 'backward caste' and 'untouchable'. We use them with equanimity. Only yesterday someone said to me quite casually: "Actually he's not an untouchable - he's a backward caste man." This is just a piece of your everyday friendly neighbourhood bigotry - so easy to ignore or get used to.

Amidst all this current talk of national pride it remains to be asked whether these are the values and traditions we need nuclear bombs to protect and defend. And it remains to be said that no military arsenal, however formidable, will ever be able to shield us from the shame of what we do to one another.

In recent months, because I was among those who protested against nuclear tests in Pokhran, I have been labelled a 'peacenik'. I'm not a peacenik. I merely have strong views about wars and the manner in which they should be waged. Let me make myself clear, I believe in this war, but I do not believe

translation of her novel (in association with D.C. Books, the Kerala-based publishers) and use the royalties therefrom to promote Dalit literature. Making clear the fact that hers was not a patronising or a charitable act, Arundhati Roy declared: "This is not a gift. It is an invitation to enter into a working contract with me. I hope you will publish it, sell it and use the royalties from the Malayalam book to help Dalit writers to tell their stories to the world."

The fount of Arundhati Roy's significant act of literary solidarity was also made clear. "I give you my book in memory of Velutha," she concluded, alluding to the "untouchable" protagonist of the novel, *The God of Small Things*.

THE Akademi's response to Arundhati Roy's expression of solidarity with the Dalit cause was characterised by much warmth. Her speech, delivered in Malayalam, drew loud and repeated applause. A spokesman for the Akademi said: "Her deep-seated sympathies for Dalits are evident in her novel." He then opened a copy of *The God of Small Things* and read out: "Who's Velutha?", Sophie Mol wanted to know. "A man we love," Rahel said.

The Dalit perception of the socio-cultural significance of Arundhati Roy was explained in a paper presented by T.B. Vijaya Kumar, a Dalit activist, at a seminar organised by the Akademi on January 16 on the topic of "savarna sahitayam" (literature of the upper castes). The paper spoke of Arundhati Roy as "the brave daughter of the Sunnahados" and went on to explain why.



The 400th anniversary of the 1599 Udayamperoor Sunnahados (a synod at Udayamperoor, Kerala) is being celebrated by Dalit groups; the Akademi considers the Sunnahados as an event that marked the starting point of an anti-caste movement within the Church in India. According to Vijaya Kumar's paper, it was organised by Portuguese-Goan Archbishop (Alexis Dom) Menezes to purge Syrian Christians in Kerala of their Hindu values and to make them "real Christians". He said that before the arrival of the Portuguese, Syrian Christians were believed to have followed, like upper-caste Hindus, a caste system and norms of untouchability, and also allegedly resorting to oppression of the lower castes.

The Akademi considers Archbishop Menezes' efforts as revolutionary since among other things he opposed untouchability and wanted equal rights on family property to be granted to women. But, according to the paper, the Archbishop did not get very far with his ideas; the 1653 "koonankurisu sathyam" (an oath taken at koonankurisu at Mattancherry against Western domination of the church) put an end to the trend.

The Protestant missionaries of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) and the London Mission Society (LMS) which were active in Kerala during a later period initiated social movements which led to a renaissance in thinking. This was followed by the emergence of social reformers such as Sri Narayana

Guru and Ayyankali, and historic figures belonging to the Left movement.

Arundhati Roy was hailed by the Akademi as a person who, unlike others sharing her origins, had been totally purged of Hindu values. One speaker made a comparative study between Arundhati Roy and Shashi Tharoor, author of *The Great Indian Novel*. The Five Dollar Smile and Other Stories and India from Midnight to the Millennium, who too hails from Kerala. Arundhati Roy's empathy for Dalits, as manifested in the young twins' interactions with Velutha, came in for particular mention. Tharoor, by contrast, was presented in unfavourable light.

In declaring her full support for the Dalit struggle against centuries-old oppression, Arundhati Roy seems to have made a positive impression in Kerala's literary circles, even among those who do not fully subscribe to the Dalit Sahitya Akademi's world-view.

Writer Thikkodiyan, who is Chairman of the Kerala Sangeetha Natak Akademi, said: "I am happy that she has identified herself with a cause. It has to be seen as a sincere gesture since she already has the fame and the money ... But the Dalit Akademi's activists sometimes have strange views which are not always based on facts."

Dr. Punathil Kunhabdulla, Malayalam novelist, and Dr. M.M. Basheer, literary critic, observed that Arundhati Roy's gesture in inviting the Akademi to become involved in the publication of the Malayalam edition of her novel and offering it the royalties therefrom had

given a big boost to Dalit literature, even though, in their opinion, it was difficult to agree with all of the Akademi's views and activities. Punathil Kunhabdulla was all praise for the Akademi for its having organised the reception for Arundhati Roy. Basheer said that in his view, the success of the Malayalam edition would depend on the quality of translation. He attributed the popularity of the English edition in Kerala mainly to the quality of the writing.

The God of Small Things is, of course, not the first novel by a writer from Kerala to explore the social condition of Dalits. Dalits rate Kadambanitta Ramakrishnan's *Kurathi*, Valsala's *Nellu*, Kumaran Asan's *Duravastha* and K.J. Baby's *Maveli Manram* as classics in Dalit literature; their authors, significantly, are not Dalits. Basheer writes *Kochayathai*, a novel by Dalit writer Narayan, as one of the outstanding Malayalam novels in 1998.

The Kerala Dalit Sahitya Akademi holds the opinion that the literary and cultural atmosphere in Kerala is hostile to Dalits; however, a big volume of Dalit literature exists in Malayalam. A good example is offered by the recent issues of the literary magazine *Kerala Kavitha* which feature Malayalam translations of Dalit writings in Marathi and Oriya.

All things considered, Arundhati Roy's visit gave a big boost to the Akademi, which is known to hold radical views on socio-cultural issues. The

(and that includes myself and my book), is above criticism.

Having said that, if, taking into account all the complex, convoluted politics of the times we live in, I had to choose one constituency whose approval I would cherish the most, it would be this one - the one to which all of you who are gathered here today belong.

The God of Small Things is my book, but in some ways, because it grew out of this place it belongs to you too. The rage and the beauty is yours. I want to share it with you in a real way. In a pragmatic, practical way.

I've thought long and hard about what I can do in a world where all the avenues seem to be blocked. Where the historically privileged own everything - the newspapers, the magazines, the airwaves. The easiest thing for me to do would have been to make a financial donation to the Dalit Sahitya Akademi. But somehow that made me uncomfortable. It would have been the quick, arrogant, patronising thing to do. And neither you nor I believe in aid or charity. What I have decided to do is to entrust to the Dalit Sahitya Akademi a part of the most precious thing that I possess. The God of Small Things.

I would be honoured if you will publish it in Malayalam, if you will. It's yours - along with its strengths, its secrets, its faults and flaws. This is not a gift. It is an invitation to enter into a working contract with me. I hope you will publish it, sell it and use the royalties from the Malayalam book to help Dalit writers to tell their stories to the world. I promise you that I will be as difficult with you as I have been with every one of my other publishers. I will insist on the best possible translation. I will interfere with the design. I give you my book in memory of Velutha.

By arrangement with the *Frontline* magazine of India

reflection

## Writer and Society

by R. Madhavan Nair

On a visit to Kerala, where The God of Small Things is set, its Booker Prize-winning author Arundhati Roy last fortnight eloquently expressed solidarity with "the Dalit struggle for justice and equality in a society wracked by caste prejudice" and made a significant, and widely appreciated, contribution to the cause of Dalit literature.

Speaking at a reception Arundhati Roy, whose best-selling novel narrates poignantly a tragic tale of forbidden love involving an "untouchable", said that in her opinion the Dalit struggle for justice and equality would be, "and indeed ought to be", the biggest challenge that India would face in the next century. "I am fully aware," she observed, "that this particular war will be an immense and complicated one. That it will be waged in all sorts of ways, by all sorts of people, in all sorts of places."

And in a forthright expression of her solidarity with the Dalit cause, Arundhati Roy added: "I'm here to enlist."

The novelist, who has spoken out powerfully against the Indian Government's May 1998 nuclear explosions and attempted nuclear weaponisation in her essay, "The End of Imagination", then proceeded to make a generous contribution to the cause of Dalit literature by offering "a part of the most precious thing that I possess" to the Dalit Sahitya Akademi. She invited the Akademi to publish the Malayalam

translation of her novel (in association with D.C. Books, the Kerala-based publishers) and use the royalties therefrom to promote Dalit literature. Making clear the fact that hers was not a patronising or a charitable act, Arundhati Roy declared: "This is not a gift. It is an invitation to enter into a working contract with me. I hope you will publish it, sell it and use the royalties from the Malayalam book to help Dalit writers to tell their stories to the world."

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what might have been — if the fantasies of visionaries of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had been implemented. For the Parisien capital is ambivalent. It loves the shock and controversy that is produced by avant-garde and audacious architecture. Yet, Parisiens deep down are extremely comfortable with their surroundings and dislike any major jolts in their scenic panorama. Time has proven successful 'C'est l'an 2000 — le Paris des Utopies'; the proof. In fact, the public is invited to a retrospective of Paris in the year 2000 by those who imagined it between 1860 and 1960.... What is there of our utopia, our day-dreams, our dreams?

A series of spectacular and provocative photographs envisioning Paris in the twenty-first century reminds us of

Can one imagine skyscrapers surrounding and overlooking the Eiffel Tower? Well, so was a design envisioned in 1932. Horror of horrors. How about the Ile de la Cite island, complete with the Notre-Dame rebuilt one hundred metres above Paris like a Titanic afloat in the Seine? Surrealistic. This was the dream of the German architect, Ingrid Webendoerfer. Paul Maymont imagined a man-made lake in front of the Notre-Dame (where now stands the square) which would reflect the cathedral in its waters. The lake would be one hundred steps below the Notre-Dame at level with the Seine river. I like the idea. How about a new city district under the Seine? A 1962 project by Paul Maymont once again envisioned an urban setting complete with banks, shopping

centres, theatres, sport complexes, parking lots, offices and swimming pool well below the Seine. The metropolis of tomorrow was to cover fifteen kilometres. An intriguing idea.

A light-house for visitors from outer-space? Such was the description of a 347 metres high (27 metres more than the Eiffel Tower) in the la Defense area west of the city. The competitor would have chrome, laser lights flashing, facilities to guide supersonic planes; a cyber-tower designed in the 1960s by Nicolas Schaffer. Pure science fiction. Other turn-of-the-last-century visionaries included twenty-first century aero-cabs flying with wings according to post-cards printed by the Bon Marche department store on the Left Bank in 1990. Exists today in the form of heli-

copters.

The most incredulous? A photograph of the Place de la Concorde, the Champs Elysees side showing a massive beach-front complete with waves, sun umbrellas and people in the water — utopia of the 1930s. I'll pass this one. Does there exist a more perfect urban landscape anywhere in the world than that vista which encompasses the Arc de Triomphe, the Champs Elysees, the Place de la Concorde and the Louvre — all that which makes up the Great Paris Axis? Mercifully, this projection of Paris into the twenty-first century never came off the drawing board.

"There is nothing better than what the French do well, and nothing worse than what they do badly."

By arrangement with the *Frontline* magazine of India

column: parisien portrait

## 'This was the year 2000 — the Paris of Utopias'

by Raana Haider

"A country where the impossible always happens and the inevitable never does." Anon

A Eiffel Tower 'skirted' by an ornate palace half-way up the structure? The Arc de Triomphe with a hotel in a kaleidoscope of architectural designs perched on top of the Arc? Impossible? Ludicrous? Well, these were designs proposed by the cartoonist Albert Robida (1848-1926) to prepare Paris for the twenty-first century. Robida proposed in the late nineteenth century to modernize existing Parisien monuments for the Paris of the 2000s.

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