

**Transcription of Arundhati Roy reading and
Ms. Roy and Howard Zinn in conversation
Lentic Performing Arts Center
Santa Fe, New Mexico
18 September 2002**

CONVERSATION

Howard Zinn: We're just going to sit up here. [Laughter] Arundhati just said to me, Well, we can talk about the things I left out. [Laughter] Well, I guess. . . what did you leave out? [Laughter] I was sitting there, listening to you, and thinking: there it was. There it is.

Arundhati Roy: OK. Let's go. [Laughter]

Zinn: You don't want me to say anything nice about? OK. But really, what I thought as I was sitting there, is there is this mastery of detail, all expressed in the most poetic and beautiful way. That combination is so hard to achieve. I know this is not a lead-in to a conversation, it's a final statement. [Laughter] [Applause]

Let me ask you this, Arundhati. How did you come to decide, after writing *The God of Small Things*, that you were not going to immediately sit down and write another novel?

Roy: Well, actually, I would have had to decide to sit down and write another novel. In that I've never believed in this thing of having a single profession and doing it, doing the same thing all your life. It's like your brain is growing in one direction, like some tumor. I never ? a lot of people keep saying to me that you must be under a lot of pressure from your publishers to write another book. Well, I think that's, I mean, it's a bit dishonest to put it that way for me because no one can pressurize me, you know. They don't have a handle on me. It's a relief. If I wanted to accept that pressure, it would be a pressure.

And I just think that very soon, actually, very soon after I finished writing *The God of Small Things*, and it came out, India did, you know, it's nuclear tests, and I recognized the fact that here was, you know, the papers, and lots of public people, and writers and painters, and everybody was standing up and applauding this horrible act. And I realized then that, you know, staying quiet was as political an act as speaking out. and I had this space to make a statement And if I didn't, it was something that I couldn't live with. Which was when I wrote *The End of Imagination*.

And also, I think being involved in the kinds of things I've been involved in in the last few years have been wonderful for me because I've met the most extraordinary people. I've been close to the most extraordinary political happenings. And I also know that when I'm ready to write another book, if I'm ready to write ? I keep saying *The God of Small Things* was a collaboration between me and a little bit of magic. And you have to know how to wait, you know. It'll come. If it doesn't, that's all right, but if it does, it will come. You can't, you can't just force...you know it's not some factory product.

Zinn: No one would accuse that of being a factory product.

Roy: No. [Laughter] No, I mean the next?.

Zinn: It was interesting what you said about, you know, turning to the political world from writing a novel. You encountered people.., you suddenly found all these people you could work with and do things with and the writer, working alone, writing a novel or a poem doesn't experience that. And the writers who never come out of their study, you know, or out of their agent's office, right, and get out into the struggle and turmoil of the world, they are missing something, you know, very, very important.

Roy: I think the truth is that I was actually always a political person. Obviously, it's not something that suddenly happens to you. So, when I was studying architecture, by the time I was in 4th year, I knew that I would never practice architecture. I had become very interested in town planning and how cities came to be the way they were and how land use plans, and architectural plans, are designed to exclude most people and make them illegal. You know, the whole business of the citizen, and the non-citizen.

So, in a sense, *The God of Small Things* is also a very political book. I don't think... obviously I was never the kind of person who was only in their agent's office because I didn't have an agent. I didn't even know there were such things, until you know, I wrote *The God of Small Things*...

Zinn: I'm sorry to have brought it up.

Roy: No. [Laughter] But, you're right. I think the business of getting into the world, and living your life? *Living* and then writing about what you live, is what interests me. And the idea that, I mean? I live in times, and I think that those times are here in America now, but they've been in India for a while, where, when you write something, the worst thing that can happen to you is not a bad review, you know. Some how it's injected directly into life and you never know what's going to happen if you write a book. I mean, *The God of Small Things*... I was, of course, taken to court for corrupting public morality...

Zinn: Yes.

Roy: ... which I had a technical problem with because, I said, at least he should have said, ?further corrupting public morality?.
[Laughter]

Zinn: When I read about that charge against you I immediately went back to *The God of Small Things* because I wanted to see what pages they were? [laughter] ? that were possibly corrupting public morality and I found them. [Laughter] It was wonderful. [Laughter]

You said before you were always a political person. I mean, not from the age of three or four or five. You said something about when you were somehow finishing work at the school of architecture at some point you decided, no, this was not for you. So something must ?did something happen?

Roy: Well, actually, you know, absurdly, it does start from the age of three or four because I lived in a ... you know my mother came from this very little village in Kerala called Kottayam and she belongs to a very parochial community called the Syrian Christians

and she married a Bengali, you know, outside the community. And then made the mistake of marrying him and then divorcing him and came back to the village. And so we grew up sort of outside the realm of all the protections that that society chose to offer its members. So from a very young age, one was aware of the fact that you were not going to be given those protections. You had to constantly try to understand what was going on and how to survive in this space and how not to go under. So my mother is very political, not in this overt way but I think the minute you lose the protection of this nuclear family that protects you from the world you're on your own. And then politics is in your life. You have to ride the waves. You have to understand it.

Zinn: You were on your own, as a woman, which is a special situation. I mean, not just in India, I suppose being a woman on your own anywhere...

Roy: Yes.

Zinn: ?is something to deal with but I imagine that maybe in India there was something about that ?

Roy: It was... though my mother and I are great mates now, when I was 17 I left home and I was on my own, being "that woman" as the Supreme Court judges write to call me. I think? you see what happens in India is that the ?real life is so frightening that the middle class really protects itself and really turns inwards. It's almost blind. It's almost like they have some lenses that fall over their eyes and they can't see. They can't see the horrors around because that's the only way to survive in some sense. I think when you fall out of that cozy, little nest and there's no safety net, you realize that it's not all that horrible, actually. I don't think that you can ever unlearn that, once you've been there, however briefly, or however temporarily. You don't forget. You don't forget, whatever happens to you. I keep thinking that there are people in the world who are safe, and there are people in the world who are unsafe. And if you're unsafe you always seek out the unsafe. Whatever happens to you in your life, you're always sort of taking that walk. So it was the best university, I think, to go to.

Zinn: It's interesting what you say about the middle class, blinding itself, protecting itself from what is happening to so much of the population. And this is so much the history of the United States which developed perhaps the largest middle class. That is, the United States has had enough wealth so it could bribe enough people in the population to create a middle class which became useful as a buffer between the very rich and that part of the population which could not even rise into the middle class. So the middle class, in the United States, has always been enticed by the establishment into thinking that it can rise into the upper class and not told that it can also descend. [Laughter]. The result is that the United States educational system teaches us from the very beginning that we are not a class society. To use the term "class", in the United States? it's just a term you use for school, right. [Laughter] ?This is my class? sort of thing.

Roy: ?I'm in 6th class.?

Zinn: Yes. The idea of a class society is something that has always made people in power nervous. If anybody brings up the idea of class - class conflict, class struggle - you mustn't talk about that. We're brought up in the United States to believe that we're one big happy family. [Laughter]

Roy: And aren't you?

Zinn: [Laughter] We all have the same interests. In fact we have the language to try to make that imprint on the American people. The language of national interest, the phrase is ?national interest??

Roy: I'm familiar with it.

Zinn: ...assuming we all have the same interest: Exxon and I.

Roy: Enron and I. [Laughter]

Zinn: Enron and you. [Laughter] Yes. So it takes? but there's a perception that people in the United States have growing up, especially people in the working classes of the United States, they know that their interests and Exxon are not the same. And they show it.

Roy: Well, the thing is, in India it's so complicated that the more, the longer you live there, the more confused you get because when you think of class ?in India you have so many other things too. You have caste which is a complex business because ?.I grew up in Kerala which had the first ever democratically elected Marxist government in the world. But all the leaders of the Marxist party are Brahmins. [Laughter] It's a very complex way they use all these things. Indian democracy must be one of the most fascinating beasts on earth. Then you have such a complicated network of region and religion and language. So you have a situation where you have a country where we have I think it's 18 or 19 official languages, and hundreds and hundreds of dialects. You can't ?you know the Supreme Court functions in English. Nobody can understand what's going on in there. I mean, even if you speak English you can't understand. [Laughter]

Zinn: Yes.

Roy: Imagine when they gave a judgment about me. They said, "vicious stultification and vulgar debunking cannot be permitted to pollute the pure stream of justice". [Laughter].

Zinn: That's what you were doing?

Roy: I had to look up in the dictionary to figure out what they meant and at the end of it they just kept saying, "but the respondent is not behaving like a reasonable man". [Laughter] At least I can follow what they're saying. But people from the Narmada valley, they have no idea what is this court, how do you file a police case. Or if there is a police case filed against you, what does it say, what are you supposed to do? It's like living ?it's like if I was living in Czechoslovakia or something. How would I function? And that's the way most Indians have to function in India.

Zinn: We don't understand our Supreme Court either. [Laughter] [Applause] The whole object of going to law school...

Roy: We're not meant to understand.

Zinn: ... is to not allow people to understand what you're saying.

Roy: Exactly. [Laughter] One of the reasons that the court got very angry with me was because when they filed this case, I said I won't get a lawyer and I will write my own reply, which I did. It was perfectly legal. I checked it with a lawyer. But it was written in language that ordinary people could understand. It was published in the press and that they didn't like. So every time I went to court they got a rash, like, why is she here? Take her away.

Zinn: Well, defending yourself is not something you're supposed to do because you're taking a job away from people who are desperately unemployed?.. [Laughter]...need work. So they don't like people to defend themselves.

But it's interesting? During the Vietnam war, we began to get used to people defending themselves in court because we had these anti-war protesters were part of this new '60s generation. Forget the experts, forget the professionals, we don't have any faith in them. All these lawyers are over 30. We don't want... and we don't trust professionals. We want to speak for ourselves. It was such a refreshing thing, actually. That they were breaking through this notion that somebody must speak for you. So, in trial after trial that took place of anti-war protesters, people represented themselves which made judges very nervous, made the prosecution very nervous, but enabled the honest feelings of the defendants to come across to the court.

Roy: But in India the whole thing about contempt of court ? it has a very sinister edge to it because ? the Supreme Court is actually the most powerful institution in India. As the government and the politicians get more and more corrupt, the Supreme Court has started making huge decisions on their behalf. So the Supreme Court decides whether a dam should be built or not, whether slums should be cleared or not, whether industry should be in the city or outside, whether privatization should be endorsed, whether structural adjustment is a good thing or not. All these decisions which affect the lives of millions of people are being taken now in the Supreme Court and the contempt of court act - law- says that while you can criticize a judgment, you cannot put a series of judgments together and say what is the Supreme Court up to? What is the politics of the Supreme Court? Supposing I have evidence that a Supreme Court judge was corrupt? Supposing I had him on film taking a bribe? It's not admissible in court because you can't lower the dignity of the court by saying that a judge is corrupt. [Laughter] This is the situation.

Even when I went to prison for contempt of court and came out - we had a big press conference, there were hundreds of journalists, a lot of senior editors spoke out quite bravely about this act. They are most scared of the court; more scared of the court than of politicians, and a normal journalist ? it's not that you're going to have a death sentence if you commit contempt of court, but six months in prison you're going to lose your job, you're going to have maybe two or three years of a criminal trial, you have to hire a lawyer, no one is willing to take the risk. So there's just dead silence on that subject. It's very, very frightening. And that's what I said in my affidavit. A judicial dictatorship is as bad as any other kind of dictatorship. [Applause]

Zinn: We have a situation where the Supreme Court does make decisions which are important but not usually on *the* most important things. And by that I mean on issues of war and peace. That is, when it comes to issues of war and peace, the Supreme Court may just as well not exist.

Roy: Well, that's true...

Zinn: They just defer to the power of the President, just as Congress defers to the power of the President. There's no democracy in foreign policy. You brought up the issue ? you said democracy in India is very complicated. Well, democracy in the United States is very complicated because we have democracy and we don't have democracy. It's here and it's not here.

Roy: And it's gone.

Zinn: Yes. And you have democracy once in four years, for a moment. [Laughter]

Roy: Yes.

Zinn: And even there you don't have democracy. [Applause]

You are supposed to have political democracy with elected representatives and so on, but you certainly don't have economic democracy. You don't have democracy in the work place. You don't have democracy in every day life. There is a pretense that you have democracy in political life but ?

Roy: You have elections.

Zinn: Yes.

Roy: Elections are democracy.

Zinn: Yes, elections. Imagine, you go into the voting booth and you pull the chain, [laughter] and you have fulfilled your duty. And that's it. And then you can sit back and let the President do what he wants. During the Vietnam war ? there are Americans who are naive enough to believe the constitution of the United States, to believe what they learned in junior high school about American democracy and they learned that we have three branches - everybody learns the same thing, you must have some things that everybody learns - and here what we learn is that we have three branches of government. The teacher always makes a diagram on the board [laughter] which is very ? because you can't imagine it in you head ? [laughter] you can keep two things but not three things in your head. [Laughter]

And so you have three branches of government: the executive, the legislative, and the judicial. And what you learn is that there are checks and balances [laughter] and that each branch is there to check the other. And when you sit there, as a young person, you say this is marvelous. Nothing bad can happen. [Laughter] And then you grow up and you see nothing but bad things happen.

During the Vietnam War, the President decides on war or I should say the President and the people around him, some of them unknown to the public, others not known to the public. The President and the people around him decide on war. He goes to Congress. To me it's absurd that liberal people today. . . the most courage that some Congressmen can muster up against the war in Iraq is to say let Congress vote on it. As if we don't know the history of Congressional obsequiousness. That we don't know the history of Congress approving every war that has ever been fought in one way or another. What happened during the Vietnam War is that a

number of G.Is, and this is ?one of the glorious things about the Vietnam war was the uprising of soldiers against the war and the organization of Vietnam Veterans Against the War, wonderful dramatic scenes of that kind of resistance. There were these G.Is who refused to go to Vietnam. They said the Constitution says Congress must declare war. Congress has not declared war. And

they had learned in junior high school that the job of the Supreme Court is to it that things are constitutional. So they appealed to the Supreme Court. And what did the Supreme Court do? It said, we can't handle this. The Supreme Court - they have black robes, you think they have power, and they shrink into the distance as war appears. So it's left then to the people, which happened during the Vietnam War. And I think what you're talking about in India, it's left to the people of India.

I saw that film ?a wonderful film was made about Arundhati's little tiff with the Supreme Court. I didn't know how to describe it. [Laughter] I didn't want to say a war with the Supreme Court.

Roy: Flirtation. [Laughter]

Zinn: A little encounter with. . . there's a wonderful film made about it which you should see and it was great to see the huge crowds of people supporting you during that. I'm sure it was because of those huge crowds that the Supreme Court went easy on you, didn't sentence you to life imprisonment. [Laughter]

Roy: No, life was not on the cards, fortunately.

Zinn: But I liked what you said about the...that in India there's a kind of inherent anarchism which will save India.

Roy: We hope. I think it's like? trying to corporatize India is like trying to put an iron grid on the ocean. I just think even though Fascists are not disciplined, they're ?hopefully they'll mess it up.

Zinn: I think we can count on them to mess it up.

Roy: I hope so.

Zinn: We need that. We'll try our best. We'll accomplish a lot, but we do really need them to mess it up.

Roy: Absolutely.

Zinn: But I think we can count on it. [Laughter]

Roy: Yes.

Zinn: Because they do it.

Roy: They do it. The only trouble Howard, is that in India right now? I think few Americans know about this, but in March this year, the BJP which is the Bharatiya Janata Party is part of what they call the Sangh Parivar, a whole sort of family of Hindu right wing organizations. The BJP is the political end of it and what's called the RSS -the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh - is the cultural guild. Now the Prime Minister, the Home Minister, the disinvestment minister, all these people belong to the RSS. The RSS has been preparing the ground for this kind of right wing - India is only for the Hindus thing - since the late '20s and they are open admirers of Hitler and his methods and so on, and in March this year there was a massacre of Muslims in Gujarat. As soon as the massacre was over, the Gujarat government, headed by the BJP, wanted to hold elections because they felt that they would win the election because they'd polarized the vote.

All over India they have what are called (untranslatable) which are branches where young people, 10-year-old children, are being indoctrinated into religious bigotry and hatred, and how to create communal trouble, and how to rewrite history books, and all this is happening. So the Fascists will definitely mess it up. In fact the reason they're so desperate is because in State after State they were losing the election. But you see, now, whether they're in power or not, they've injected this poison into the veins of a very complex country and that's very frightening, very, very frightening, to have to deal with on a daily basis.

You cannot imagine the things that happened in Gujarat -little children were? 2,000 people were killed, women were raped, women had their stomachs slit open and their fetuses pulled out. Not one or two but many, many. Little children were forced to drink petrol then matches were put down their throats and they just blew up like bombs. It's a very, very frightening situation just now. This government in India keeps saying, we're natural allies of the U.S. So there hasn't...it's not just a coincidence that this was not reported or that it's being suppressed. The whole nuclear flashpoint with Pakistan was mostly due to the fact that the Indian government wanted to distract attention from - the world's attention from - Gujarat to this, and it was very, very successful in doing that.

Zinn: Well, if I hadn't read what you wrote about Gujarat and what happened there, I would never have known, because people in the United States do not know what's happening in India. People in the United States generally know very little about what is happening in the rest of the world.

Roy: Thanks to the free press.

Zinn: Yes. [Laughter] It's clear that what we need more and more is this interchange across boundaries.

Roy: Yes. Real globalization.

Zinn: People's globalization. [Applause] I see the world with chalk lines dividing everybody. And I see us as having the job of, little by little, walking across those?

Roy: And rubbing them off.

Zinn: ..and rubbing those chalk lines out.

Roy: That's why I keep saying that I think that literature is the opposite of a nuclear bomb. When I wrote *The God of Small Things* I

would go to Estonia, and Finland, and hear from China, people would say, oh, but this was my childhood. One of the reasons why I never wanted it to be made into a film was because I thought there are six or seven million films going on in people's heads and this one filmmaker will come and take it away. Let it be the world's childhood. [Applause]

The idea that there is that; that there is... that human beings across the world do share love, and terror, and gentleness, and these things which literature links up and which nuclear bombs just build the walls and separate.

ZINN: I think your coming here does that. Not only your writing does that but your coming here and us listening to you and knowing that we are part of a 'carass'. Have any you have read Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*? Kurt Vonnegut is remarkable?this remarkable, interesting, odd mind. In *Cat's Cradle* he talks about a 'carass'. A carass is when people feel an affinity with one another. They don't know exactly why but it crosses all lines. It crosses national, racial, sexual... it crosses all lines. That's what we depend on.

Roy: Yes. It's like I'd never been to Pakistan. Delhi and Pakistan - I mean Lahore - are maybe a one-hour flight away from each other. I went to Pakistan last month. I had to go from Delhi to Dubai to Islamabad to Lahore. It took me 18 hours. There is so much in the Indian press and equally in the Pakistan press about anti-Indian demonstrations and anti-Pakistan demonstrations and we're all going to kill each other and everybody hates everybody and so on. I landed in Lahore and within seconds we were all sitting at this dining table and I felt like I was in Delhi. It was just so sad and the audience that came. . . people were just in tears, not because of me or what I said or anything, just because it's such a relief not to always be subjected to this media's representation of government positions. I really feel that the media, the corporate media, has played a terrible part in all this and people are just going to have to blow holes in this dam between them and insist on listening to independent real voices, real human beings. [Applause]

Zinn: We were saying to one another, when you were not listening, that it's very hard to end a conversation on stage.[Laughter] And so the thought was that we would finish by Arundhati reading something that you would like to read to all of us.

Roy: OK. It'll just be two minutes and I just want to leave you with a thought, with a way of seeing. This is part of the essay that I wrote when India tested nuclear weapons in 1998. It's quite a long essay so this is just a very small extract, a very personal part of it.

"In early May 1988, I left home for three weeks. While I was away, I met a friend of mine whom I've always loved for, among other things, her ability to combine deep affection with a frankness bordering on savagery. [Laughter]

"I've been thinking about you", she said. ?about *The God of Small Things* -- what's in it, what's over it, under it, around it, above it? "

She fell silent for a while. I was uneasy and not at all sure that I wanted to hear the rest of what she had to say. She, however, was sure that she was going to say it. ?In this last year - less than a year actually - you've had too much of everything - fame, money, prizes, adulation, criticism, condemnation, ridicule, love, hate, anger, envy, generosity - everything. In some ways it's a perfect story. Perfectly baroque in its excess. The trouble is that it has, or can have, only one perfect ending." Her eyes were on me, bright, with a slanting, probing brilliance. She knew that I knew what she was going to say. She was insane.

She was going to say that nothing that happened to me in the future could ever match the buzz of this. That the whole of the rest of my life was going to be vaguely dissatisfying. And, therefore, the only perfect ending to the story would be death. [Laughter] *My death.*

[Laughter]

You've lived too long in New York, I told her. There are other worlds. Other kinds of dreams. Dreams in which failure is feasible. Honorable. Sometimes even worth striving for. Worlds in which recognition is not the only barometer of brilliance or human worth. There are plenty of warriors that I know and love, people far more valuable than myself, who go to war each day, knowing in advance that they will fail. True, they're less successful in the most vulgar sense of the word, but by no means less fulfilled.

The only dream worth having, I told her, is to dream that you will live while you're alive and die only when you're dead.

"Which means exactly what", she said, looking a little annoyed.

[Laughter]

I tried to explain, but didn't do a very good job of it because sometimes I need to write to think. So I wrote it down for her on a paper napkin and this is what I wrote:

To love. To be loved. To never forget your own insignificance. To never get used to the unspeakable violence and the vulgar disparity of life around you. To seek joy in the saddest places. To pursue beauty to its lair. To never simplify what is complicated or complicate what is simple. To respect strength, never power. Above all, to watch. To try and understand. To never look away. And never, never, to forget.

Roy: Thank you. [Applause]

Thank you.