

**No Punches Pulled: The Direct, Damning, and Daring Language of
Arundhati Roy in the Essay "Peace Is War" from
*An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire*¹**

Arundhati Roy has many extraordinary gifts as a writer and speaker, but perhaps none as admirable as her ability to synopsise deep and complex issues with the most direct and accusatory statements of any social commentator of our time. In so doing she is incredibly brave, because she takes on the most dangerous and powerful organizations in the world – corporations.

The first piece in this collection, "Peace Is War: The Collateral Damage of Breaking News," is the text of a speech she delivered on March 7, 2003, in India. That was just 10 days before the most recent U.S. invasion of Iraq. Her audience is Indians attending a media workshop. In the talk Roy focuses on the collusion of the media in the Bush administration's (and co-conspirators') selling of the invasion to the world public as the response to a "threat" and the noble cause of "bringing democracy to Iraq."

In her typical fashion, Roy pulls no punches. She opens gleefully, with the news that an English daily has openly offered to sell space in its editorial pages to anyone who wants to pay to be featured. This, she says, is simply exposing the true colors of mainstream media. Using well-known examples of the subversion of a free media to corporate interests (the September 11, 2001, attacks in the USA and the December 13, 2002, attack on the Indian Parliament and

¹ Roy, Arundhati. *An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire*. Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 2004; all pages 1–21.

their aftermaths), Roy synthesizes bluntly: "Free elections, a free press, and an independent judiciary mean little when the free market has reduced them to commodities available on sale to the highest bidder" (3). She talks about how controlling a democracy involves controlling the media and points out that only six U.S. corporations have 80 percent of cable TV subscribers. Even websites, she points out (remember, this is five years ago!), are being colonized by conglomerates.

She goes on to play on the word "colony" (my parallel), likening the independent media, what she calls "New Media" to an "annoying swarm of bees buzzing around an old buffalo" ("Old Media"). "For the bees (the nice, lefty ones)" [using the Web and other new forms to air truth as opposed to corporate spin is] "a significant victory, but . . . it's still the annoyed buffalo, lurching from crisis to crisis, who sets the pace" (5).

And that pace is a killer one. "As the United States gears up to attack Iraq, the U.S. government's lies are being amplified . . ." (5). Roy was one of only a few dozen people speaking truth at that time. So many others were afraid to utter anything against the U.S. administration. So many were giving the Bush administration license to lie. It is (was) good to hear someone like Roy who had no fear of calling the liars what they were, without hysteria but with cogent arguments and clear facts to support them.

She tells the truth not only about the impending invasion but about the years of Iraqi suffering during the sanctions that began in

1990 and continued as she spoke: "The war itself is thirteen years old" (5), she points out, quite rightly.

Her most scathing comments are saved for the topic of "crisis reportage" (6). "We have entered the era of crisis as a consumer item, crisis as spectacle, as theater. . . . Flying planes into buildings is its most modern, most extreme form" (6).

She escalates this argument to illustrate just how Hollywood-ized "news reporting" has become. ". . . If you don't have a crisis to call your own, you're not in the news," she states. "Starvation deaths are more effective advertisements for drought and skewed food distribution, than cases of severe malnutrition." Crises must be television- and Hollywood-worthy, or they are not covered.

Beyond that, the corporate media is a mouthpiece for whoever's in power, in India, the United States, and elsewhere. Roy talks about a scheme in which the Indian government plans to link India's rivers in what will certainly be an environmental catastrophe. "Any modern ecologist who hears about the plan," Roy says, "bursts out laughing. Yet leading papers and journals . . . carry laudatory pieces full of absurd information" (15).

Roy further notes that "Representing the views of rival political parties is what the mass media thinks of as 'balanced' reporting" (17). She points out how the media, in cahoots with the powerful corrupt in government, manage to set the people against one another, against their own interests. She shares anecdotes of how the media managed to pit environmentalists against each other — people who truly

are on the same side — by spreading disinformation and allowing it to take its viral course. Anyone who has followed the news in the last two decades knows how common a practice this is.

I know firsthand on many levels how right Roy is, and can only admire the succinct, scathing, and scholarly way in which she makes her points.