

tural principle informing the place and status of English in the country. For until and unless English comes to be viewed as another Malaysian language, English literary writing in Malaysia will continue to be pushed to the peripheries, viewed as a tradition of writing unrooted to the soil.

A collection like this is necessary to make visible the continued and valid existence of a creative and critical consciousness in English in Malaysia, and to provide an intervention in the nation's hegemonic cultural and literary traditions.

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Arundhati Roy. *The Cost of Living*. Vintage Canada, 1999. Pp. vii, 126. (Cdn) \$14.95.

Arundhati Roy. *Power Politics*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2001. Pp. 1, 182. (U.S.) \$12.00.

The title of the last chapter of Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things* becomes the main title of her next book, *The Cost of Living*. That the cost of living for certain people is tragically and ironically death continues to shock and steer Roy to write again and again. She writes about that which cannot even be imagined, the unimaginable, for it is really real. Rahel would know this. Ammu would know this. Velutha would know this, but he wouldn't be given a chance to let us know what he knows. So say my students of International Literature reading and re-reading *The Cost of Living*.

Once again, it is about the small things that are never little, that ought not ever to be belittled. The book too is small, but only in size. The first essay, "The Greater Common Good" – its title alluding at once to Jeremy Bentham and Mahatma Gandhi – is about the slow and legal destruction of hundreds of thousands of people, mainly the aborigines, the untouchables, and the poorest of the poor in India, who are being displaced by big and small dams as part of the development that both globalization and nationalism demand. The second essay, "The End of Imagination," is a response to the government of India's nuclear tests of 1998. Roy's theory is simple: "There is beauty yet in this brutal, damaged world of ours. Hidden, fierce, immense . . . It doesn't *matter* whether or not we use them [bombs]. They

will destroy us either way” (123). After all to Rahel and Estha only what matters, matters.

As in the *God of Small Things*, so too in *The Cost of Living*, references and allusions are numerous – Joyce, Nabokov, Don DeLillo, cricket, the Book of Genesis, Gandhi, Nazis, Krishna, Hanuman, Sita, Ram, the Book of Revelations, Nostradamus, Indira Gandhi, the Babri Masjid. But these are contextualized to soothe the disturbing enigma and to lead the reader hand-in-hand in a language befitting the street, the literary classics and statistics. “Little children with littler goats” (1); “Yet one fifth of our population – 200 million people – does not have safe drinking water, and two thirds – 600 million – lack basic sanitation” (14); “Day by day, river by river, forest by forest, mountain by mountain, missile by missile, bomb by bomb – almost without knowing it – we are being broken” (80); “bullshit” (125) – this is a meager sampling of that language.

What actually makes the language successful are numerous narrative techniques that come into play to further claim for the work a place in the department of English. Live drama charges a discussion on democracy; white space and italics gleefully rub mighty powers the wrong way; rhetoric rarely supercedes reality; parentheses never merely complement – they startle; scenes are carefully constructed as stories unfold within stories; glossaries and acronyms are part of the story; linearity is disrupted and yet figures stay clear; even numbers take on a purpose to become literature.

Roy’s capacity to represent, not simply experiences and events, but the effect that experiences and events have on characters, comes into play in *The Cost of Living* too. For example, this is how the historic dam initiative of Nehru gets portrayed from the perspective of an affected villager: “When the helipad was ready [on village property], a helicopter landed on it, and out came Prime Minister Nehru... Nehru made a speech. Then he pressed a button and there was an explosion on the other side of the river. After the explosion he flew away” (60).

It is not just words; the entire discourse is picturesque. The Preface ends as follows: “The story of the Narmada valley is nothing less than the story of Modern India. Like the tiger in the Belgrade zoo during the NATO bombing, we’ve begun to eat our own limbs” (x). As Roy would say, ‘this is only the beginning.’ In this work, an argument on the topic of water evolves through water imagery: “The basic premise of the argument has been inflated until it has burst into bits that have, over time, bobbed away. Occasionally a disconnected piece of the puzzle floats by...” (10). The tone is at once desperate, hopeful, angry, sarcastic, humorous: “That’s humour. It’s funny enough to

make a skull smile" (120). Such an attitude finds expression in pithiness and wit, which the reader generally grows to relish.

If literature (according to the *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*) is a piece of writing excellent in form or expression and "expressing ideas of permanent or universal interest," then Roy's is a classic in art with a purpose. If Salman Rushdie salutes Roy's "skill" and "courage" in writing this book, he does so recognizing that great art is for life. Ethics and aesthetics make a rare communion in this non-fiction prose work. In one or two cases where the style might appear weak – for example in the placement of the almost egoistic statement, "I really worry about those millions of good people in Kutch and Saurashtra" (75) – the probability of exhaustion in the face of corruption outweighs any loosening of rhetorical control.

Five essays combine in *Power Politics*. Of the five, the first one, "The Ladies Have Feelings, So... Shall We Leave It to the Experts?" asks questions that all kinds of artists and scholars of art might care about. Responding to some of the questions, Roy declares: "Rule One for a writer... is There are No Rules. And Rule Two... is There Are No Excuses for Bad Art" (5). She takes up this issue once again in "Power Politics: The Reincarnation of Rumpelstiltskin," an essay on globalization, which she earlier calls by its motto – "Life is profit" (31). She draws an eerie contrast: capitalism's use of language to mask intent and a writer's never-ending efforts to reduce the distance between language and thought. She makes a case for what *Power Politics* claims for itself: namely a writer's right to freedom, uncensored, uncurbed by conventions. Is her Booker less political than her essays? Is one therefore literature and the other not? The content and form of literature *per se* once again come under scrutiny in this book.

The third essay, called "On Citizens' Rights To Express Dissent" reproduces Roy's affidavit to the Supreme Court of India in response to criminal charges in connection with a demonstration against the building of the Sardar Sarovar Dam on the Narmada river. Mildly reminiscent of Gandhi's self-defense in court, but brimming with gleeful mischief and wit that Gandhi might have (half-heartedly) wagged a finger at, the affidavit makes a strong case for both social justice and the dignity of the writer. "As a writer I wish to state as emphatically as I can that this is a dangerous trend... It will induce a sort of enforced, fearful self-censorship. It would be bad for law, worse for literature and sad for the world of art and beauty" (98).

The fourth essay, "The Algebra of Infinite Justice," is, to say the least, on a current topic – the 9-11 attacks. So is the final essay. Together, these essays tally the facts – terrorism, the wars before and after, trade. Roy's gymnastics of imagination result in curious juxtapositions of historic episodes, particu-

larly Bush's air-dropping of food packages in a mine-ridden Afghanistan with a plausible dropping of kabab packages in New York. But where "War Is Peace" (title of the last essay), where paradoxes are the norm, even the most imaginative artist could inevitably fall short.

Power Politics challenges both postmodernists and traditionalists. On the one hand, it coaxes the meaning out of statistics and denounces the world of games. It dares to look at powers in terms of archetypal twins: Advani and Andy, Bush and Bin Laden replace Rahel and Estha of *The God of Small Things*. On the other hand, it insists on the force of non-violence but in terms most violent and risky: "The only way to combat . . . is by fighting specific wars in specific ways" (86). This comes soon after the description of a scene of villagers arriving to demonstrate, "prepared to be beaten, humiliated, and taken to prison" (81). For Roy such ideological and linguistic incongruencies are necessary because the "fight" (82) is philosophical too.

In *Power Politics* Roy once again works with content removed from under the very noses of experts in order to be re-written, re-presented, and re-produced through captivating narrative styles and unobtrusive endnotes designed for strategic mass consumption. By insisting on the accountability of art, Roy's work redefines the content of literary studies, as it does the subjectivity of readers and writers.

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Sacvan Bercovitch, ed. *The Cambridge History of American Literature*, Volume 6, Prose Writing 1910-1950. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 2002. pp. xx, 620. \$95.00 US.

After an introduction by Sacvan Bercovitch and acknowledgements, this volume is divided into the following sections: 1) A Cultural History of the Modern American Novel by David Minter; 2) Fictions of the Harlem Renaissance by Rafia Zafar; and, 3) Ethnic Modernism by Werner Sollors. There is also a detailed chronology by Jonathan Fortescue at the end. Running 272 pages, Minter's first section is the longest of the three. It contains an Introduction and three major divisions: 1) A Dream City, Lyric Years, and a Great War; 2) Fiction in a Time of Plenty; and 3) The Fate of Writing During the Depression.

Though the volume title specifies the dates 1910-1950, there is no hint in Minter's essay as to why 1910 is a significant beginning. While his essay