

CHAPTER FIVE

ESSAYING ACTIVISM:

THE POLITICAL ESSAYS OF ARUNDHATI ROY

Every writer is a writer in politics. The only question is what and whose politics?

Ngugi wa Thiong'o

The essay is personal and the personal is the political . . . essays emerge from a specific mind responding in specific time and place.

Pamela Klass Mittlefehldt

When Arundhati Roy won the Booker Prize in October 1997 for *The God of Small Things* Binoo K. John's review appeared in *India Today* with the title "The New Deity of Prose". It had a photograph that showed Roy standing on a staircase with her pet dog beside her, looking up at the camera with an innocent and calm expression; the caption read: "Stairway to Success". Fifteen years later that image and that projection of Roy looks a little ironic. She came away from the form that made her a goddess of storytelling overnight and descended the staircase to join marches, strikes, and protests. The deity of the novel became an essayist of activism. It is an extraordinary move for a writer in terms of formal/generic preference. In terms of the position of the essay it implies a stage at the other extreme from the one where R. K. Narayan stood as an essayist nearly half a century ago. Against Narayan's discomfort of having to write essays under compulsion, Roy made a conscious and voluntary choice in favor of the genre preferring it over the form of the novel in which she succeeded so completely.

However, Roy's choice is not simply a question of generic preference as it was in the case of Narayan, rather it is dictated by a consciousness that is pragmatic and moral at

the same time. “For reasons I do not fully understand”, Roy says, “fiction dances out of me. Non-fiction is wrenched out by the aching, broken world I wake up to every morning.” (“Come September”14). This painful but unavoidable consciousness of a world inflicted with injustice, deprivation and the perennial phenomenon of loss is what turned Roy from art to activism and from the novel to the essay. It is an entirely different stage in the genre’s growth and function where it forges a clean and direct link between the personal and the public, between imagination and politics and between art and commitment. The political/activist essay as practiced by Roy proves to be a form that uniquely balances these apparently contradictory categories. How the form of the political/activist essay achieves this balance and what it gains at the levels of art and of politics are the concerns this chapter will try to interrogate.

5.1 Politics in/as Literature: The Dilemma of the Political Essay

In her essay “The Ladies Have Feelings So...” Arundhati Roy framed her “writerly” identity within a set of binaries and a question:

Why it should be that the person who wrote *The God of Small Things* is called a writer, and the person who wrote the political essays is called an activist? True *The God of Small Things* is a work of fiction, but it’s no less political than any of the essays. True the essays are works of non-fiction, but since when did writers forgo the right to write non-fiction? (196)

On the surface level the problem of categorization manifests in the familiar and established divisions of fiction/nonfiction on the one hand and novel/essay on the other in which invariably the latter category is sidelined. However, in this case the root of the issue lies, as Roy points out, in the element/concept of “politics” which strengthens the already existing dichotomy by erecting a further binary between “writer” and “activist”. It is significant because it indicates the presence of another level of marginalization in relation to the form of the essay: a stage where the form is kept not only on a level of

secondariness in relation to fiction or fictional literature but is almost pushed out of the concept of “writing” as a whole. And this is the stage of the political/activist essay that Roy has been consistently practicing. To understand the formal dynamics of this essay category it is important to focus on the standards applied for its assessment.

Roy had to question the writer/activist binary because it is the discrepancy that has most consistently marked the reception of her essays within and outside the academy. At one level the visibility and popularity of Roy’s essays seems to be haunted by the most persistent paradox that plagues the genre as a whole: the huge gap between a consistently growing popular reception on the one hand and exceptionally scanty academic or pedagogical attention on the other. In contrast to the unprecedented scholarly reception of her first novel, the substantial output of the essays have gone almost unattended in the academy. This is significant because, as has been seen, on the level of thematic, ideological or political relevance the novel and the essays share the same consciousness and orientation (as Roy herself has asserted the novel was “no less political” than the essays). It is intriguing how Roy’s “interventions in debates . . . have received relatively little critical attention” whenever they have appeared in the essays “outside her engagements with these issues in *The God of Small Things*” and it is noteworthy that whereas both Roy and her novel “have been the focus of much critical debate, there has been little sustained attempt to place the novel in relation to Roy’s work before and after . . .” (Mullaney 110).

The discrepancy becomes most visible in terms of the sites of publication and reception which reveal that against this academic invisibility, Roy’s essays continue to be read and discussed in every other type of platform in diverse media all across the globe. Nagesh Rao draws attention to the varied, widespread and populist circle of production and reception within which Roy’s essays move. Rao points out that in contrast to the various editions of her novel being published by most well-known and prominent publishing houses all over the world, her essays have been mostly published by small and relatively less known but independent publishers like South End Press and Seven Stories Press etc and they have been popularized primarily by global networks of activists and individuals

involved in different anti-establishment movements in different parts of the world. Many of the essays have also been delivered as speeches to audiences at rallies and gatherings organized in support of different movements, some of them have been published in well known international magazines like *The Nation*, *The Guardian* etc, and have spread in cyberspace through websites like *Znet*, *Counter Punch*, *ISReview.org* etc. (3-4). When compared to the problematic and insecure position of the essay form, this kind of a visibility appears to be really stable and extensive. However, a second glance reveals that these very texts are completely invisible in another potential site of reception: the one consisting of textbooks, essay anthologies, and works of criticism, in other words the platforms that belong to the literary academy. “It is quite remarkable”, Rao comments ironically, “that Roy the novelist was easily welcomed into the liberal multicultural classroom but Roy the essayist has been asked to wait outside.” This condition reveals that the extensive popular reception of Roy’s essays have not been able to redeem these texts from the perennial abyss of academic negligence that marks the genre as whole. But more importantly it indicates that the whole problem of categorization of Roy’s essays, as she herself pointed out, between writing and activism has deeper issues of academic and pedagogic standardization involved. The core question underlying all these is, as Rao puts it, “how do we situate her work academically?” (4).

The fact that this question of academic accommodation or situatedness has been taken special note of in case of Roy’s essays has its own implications. At one level the problem is symptomatic of the overall marginalization of the essay genre in the academy; it is a predictable particular manifestation of a general generic status. However, when the focus of analysis is directed towards the particular essayistic form under consideration here—the form of the political essay—some other interesting and unique aspects of the issue of marginalization surface. The most important of these is what can be called a kind of “intra-generic” marginalization that is peculiar to the political essay as against other types of the essay form. It means that whereas subtypes like the familiar essay, the personal essay and the narrative essay face academic negligence in relation to and in comparison with other major genres (especially the novel), the political essay comes face to face with an inexplicable yet unavoidable marginalization within what is considered to

be the “essay canon” itself. A broader manifestation of this is the marginalization of the Latin American essays that was discussed in the second chapter of this study. As was seen in that context, through a strange twist of critical evaluation and standardization of the essay as a form the very concepts of generic/formal majority and minority on the one hand and canonical centrality and marginality on the other—concepts with which defenders of the essay have relentlessly been at war—have come to influence the levels of importance and attention bestowed on the various manifestations of the genre. The outcome of this has been the centralization of the traditions of the (German) philosophical essay and (Anglo-American) creative essay leading to the consequent creation of a secondary space for the (Latin American) political essay. The issue of marginalization of Roy’s essays hence has to be analyzed with a view to understanding this intriguing secondary status of the political essay as a distinctive form within the essay canon. What are the critical, academic and ideological presuppositions underlying this process remains to be seen.

One major reason, as has already been mentioned, is the centralized status of the personal-familiar belletristic essay as *the* essay due to which the qualities specific to this subtype has come to acquire a paradigmatic value in relation to the genre as a whole. Undoubtedly, such a practice exposes a serious and ironical gap in the whole project of redefining and re-evaluating the essay because it negates the very qualities of dynamic open-endedness, variety/flexibility and epistemological perspectivism of the essay as a unique and distinctive genre on which such redefinition and re-evaluation is based. Besides the fact that it has brought a characteristically dynamic genre down to a “static configuration” within which its canonical concept “remains trapped” (Rao 7), it has resulted in a kind of double marginalization for subtypes other than the familiar/personal essay within the essay canon. It not difficult to see that within such a framework those essayistic subtypes that appear most different from the personal/familiar essay will be the ones most drastically sidelined and no other subtype than the political essay meets such a consciousness of difference better. As the already elaborated qualities of the Latin American essays prove, the qualities of socio-cultural engagement, radicalism, materiality and, most importantly, activism that mark the political essay’s form, stand a

long distance away from the innocent, friendly, speculative, relaxed and intimate aura of the personal/familiar essay. What is more significant is the fact that at a deeper level the difference between the personal/familiar essay and the political essay becomes representative of the basic binary between the “literary” and the “political”. As Robert Atwan comments in his foreword to *Best American Essays 2007*:

The hardy type of essay that evolved from Montaigne's innovative prose has long been identified as *the* essay, the periodical essay, the moral essay, the anecdotal essay, the familiar essay, the personal essay, the true essay, and even - as William Dean Howells termed it - the “right” essay. True and right essays suggest that there might be such items on your bookshelves as false or wrong essays; the implied comparison, however, is between literary and non-literary, the essay intended as a literary work as opposed to prose put to a variety of expository, argumentative, and persuasive purposes. (ix)

To understand the full implication of such binaries and the standards of categorization based on them it is important to focus on the structures within which they are created. In her article titled “The Essay Canon” Lynn Z. Bloom sheds light on the nature, structure, function and impact of the “essay canon”. For Bloom, the only available “canon” of the otherwise scattered, misunderstood and neglected genre is primarily a “teaching canon as distinct from a critical canon” (401) and is located in anthologies and Readers meant for composition courses.¹ Bloom’s analysis helps in understanding how and why particular types of the essay are included in or excluded from this canon through her hypothesis that the central concept that runs the structure is of the “teachable” essay: “To become a candidate for canonicity, an essay first must satisfy the anthologist's criteria for teachability . . .” (413). Though Bloom notes other criteria of selection like intellectual and aesthetic balance with the overall character of the anthology concerned and economic viability in terms of affordable reprint permission, it is “teachability” that works as the controlling principle. Besides the surface level physical attributes that make an essay

teachable and canonical there remains a very crucial factor that turns canonical essays “inevitable” and that is they “have a *humanistic relevance* for discussion and writing” (415) (emphasis added). Whereas the preference for the familiar/personal model of essay writing is explained by such an orientation of the canon towards the “humanistic”, it leaves the neglect of the political essay and its broader humanitarian core unexplained. It is because, Bloom points out, interestingly and also paradoxically, this preference for the “humanistic” has not led to any dynamic or inclusive model of essay selection or study as expected. Instead it has turned into an “inescapably conservative bias in favor of familiar canonical works” (417). As a result, whenever the canon includes political or radical texts their specific historical and radical core is neutralized and only those aesthetic and formal aspects—those which fit in the conservative scheme of teachability and the “humanistic”—are foregrounded:

All anthologies (not just Readers) deracinate their material—old or new—from its original context and replant it in the anthologist's soil. There the anthologist usually cuts, espaliers, grafts, and otherwise trims the added work to fit in with the rest of the selections, on which s/he has performed comparable operations Thus any essay in a Reader is recontextualized by being juxtaposed with other essays of the anthologist's choosing, in the anthologist's arrangement, according to the anthologist's logic, aesthetic, and pedagogy All acquire new, potentially very different coloration when transplanted, especially if they illustrate rhetorical modes in belletristic anthologies, which always emphasize form and subordinate history and culture. (418)

As a result of this kind of a practice a situation arises where “texts that were, in their original context, radical and revolutionary are . . . decontextualized and sanitized” to be accommodated in the canon which means that “insofar as the political essay finds its way into the essay canon, it is likely to be overdetermined by its status as an historical

document rather than a political tract” (Rao 7). Now this principle of emphasizing form and subordinating history and culture on which the essay canon works and which either excludes radical/political essays or includes them only as deradicalized and decontextualized texts has obvious implications for the overall concept of literature from which such principles are derived in the first place. It is obvious that such a mechanism of inclusion and exclusion works on an axiomatic binary between the “literary” and the “political” where one necessarily excludes the other. How to situate a form like the political essay within such a framework? A route to finding an answer to this dilemma might lie in understanding the ideological implications of this concept of the “literary”.

As has been seen, the essay as a genre has a characteristic resistance to the official and canonical system of “Literature” when understood with any kind of exclusivist or elitist connotation. It is a resistance that manifests in different essay types in different ways; in the familiar essay it comes up a disarming but highly programmatic emphasis on the “ordinary” and the “mundane” against the highbrow and the specialized and in the narrative essay it shows itself as a principle of dynamic hybridity that plays with the boundaries of fiction and nonfiction metamorphosed into the “literary” and the “non-literary”. In the political essay this same principle of resistance functions in the form of a deviance from the concept of literature as primarily an aesthetic entity related to abstract and (supposedly) universal categories like art, imagination and pleasure and as distant from the concrete, material and individual specificities of time, space and culture. Though it might sound too simplistic and completely outmoded a concept when seen against an intellectual structure informed by theory and the consciousness of ideology, it has to be remembered that it is, at the same time, too old and powerful a concept to become completely dysfunctional.

This is the view that holds literature, as Terry Eagleton calls it in *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, as synonymous with “‘fine writing’ or *belles lettres*” (9) which implies a concept of literature as a “‘non-pragmatic’ discourse . . . [which] serves no immediate practical purpose, but is to be taken as referring to a general state of affairs” (7). The historical roots of the ideological base from which this concept of literature emerges lies,

according to Eagleton, in the second half of the eighteenth century—in the Romantic period—when there took place “a narrowing of the category of literature to the so-called ‘creative’ or ‘imaginative’ work” and “literature became virtually synonymous with the ‘imaginative’” (16). However, so far as the issue of the interrelation of literature and politics or commitment is concerned there was a strange paradox working within this concept: the conflation and equation of literature with imagination turned the former into a category where the humanitarian and ethical values of creativity, spontaneity and imagination turned it into an “alternative ideology” and “political force” that stood against the materialistic, profit oriented ethos of the growing bourgeois capitalism of the times. Interestingly, however, this “political force” did not materialize in any mode of political action or activism, rather it became an absolutist and transcendentalist principle that defined itself by its distance from any such concerns; it was a condition where literature’s “splendid remoteness from the merely prosaic matters of feeding one’s children or struggling for political justice” made it “a comfortingly absolute alternative to history”:

The assumption that there was an unchanging object known as ‘art’, or an isolatable experience called ‘beauty’ or the ‘aesthetic’, was largely a product of the very alienation of art from social life . . . the whole point of ‘creative’ writing was that it was gloriously useless, an ‘end in itself’ loftily removed from any sordid social purpose. (18)

Though such a view looks too distant to be influential in our times it has to be remembered that this view of literature as an abstract, imaginative and transcendental alternative to reality and history survived through the various and different critical understandings of the concept and function of literature in the subsequent periods in history. It is this same concept that ran through Matthew Arnold’s passionate advocacy of literature (or “poetry” as he called it) as a repository of universal human values and of criticism as a “disinterested endeavor” and culminated in the high modernist modes of Aestheticism and Symbolism to finally turn into the theoretical core of the New Criticism

in which any concern with the historical and material contexts of works of art became a “fallacy”.

It is obvious that the decontextualization of radical texts that Bloom points out as governing the essay canon is a contemporary manifestation of this distant yet persistent and powerful concept of literature as art, as “fine writing” and as humanistically relevant but also, at the same time, as a-political and a-historical. It is all the more intriguing to see how the essay—a genre that has always defied a purely literary status by its various connections with diverse areas of intellectual and creative activity—ultimately achieves a pedagogical and canonical status only by succumbing to this exclusivist standard of literary value and how that compromise, in its turn, has doubly marginalized the political essay amongst its own kind. Consequently, it becomes essential that the issue of academic and pedagogic accommodation of political/activist essay as a form is approached through an interrogation of the possibilities of an alternative view of the literary.

Interestingly, within the history of traditional literary criticism can be found concepts of the nature, function and value of literature that are based on a functional or pragmatic criteria instead of a descriptive one, earliest example being Plato himself who banished the poets from his ideal Republic because he found them “lacking in the right kind of *commitment*” (Sharma 7). One of the most elaborate accounts of this functional view may be found in M. H. Abrams’ concept of “pragmatic theories” that is incorporated in his *The Mirror and the Lamp*. It is called pragmatic “since it looked at the work of art chiefly as a means to an end, an instrument for getting something done, and tends to judge its value according to its success in achieving that aim” (15). Abrams locates this view of literary value in figures like Sidney, Dryden and Johnson—in other words figures that shaped literary criticism till the eighteenth century. However, though the historical perspective is important in understanding the construction and development of the conceptualization of the relationship between politics/commitment and literature/art, it is far more important to focus on the relevance of such conceptualizations in contemporary times and society.

One of the most well known documents that sheds light on the philosophical and ethical implications of the interrelation between art and commitment against a backdrop of a politically and ideologically complicated modern world is Jean-Paul Sartre's *What Is Literature* of 1948. Though the thinker and his ideas are more than half a century away their relevance for contemporary times lies in the fact, as Steven Unger points out, that they "echo the heightened sense of history and circumstance Sartre confers on the acts of reading and writing . . . (3) which reflect the nuances of Sartre's concept of "literature engagée". Sartre's basic concern is the function and affectivity of art in representing the world and in shaping existence and he develops his thesis by conceptualizing art in binary categories. His first differentiation is between literature on the one hand and music and painting on the other. The difference between the two lies, for Sartre, in the way they approach reality; whereas literature, through its use of words, points at "signification" underlying things, for the other arts things are just objects and "they do not refer to anything exterior to themselves" (8). In terms of "engagement", hence, Sartre's assessment is unapologetic: "One does not paint significations; one does not put them to music. Under these conditions, who would dare require that the painter or musician engage himself?" The ethos of engagement then belongs exclusively to the art of writing because "the writer deals with significations". However, even within writing engagement comes with specifications of form and here Sartre differentiates between poetry and prose: "The empire of signs is prose; poetry is on the side of painting, sculpture, and music" (11). Sartre places poetry with the other arts because though it uses the medium of words just like prose, poetry falls short of making words an instrument of engagement: "Poets are men who refuse to utilize language. Now, since the quest for truth takes place in and by language conceived as a certain kind of instrument, it is unnecessary to imagine that they aim to discern or expound the true" (12). In contrast to this characteristic inability of the medium of poetry, prose, in Sartre's analysis, "is in essence utilitarian" and the prose writer is defined "as a man who *makes use* of words" (19). In Sartre's analysis prose achieves this effect in most remarkable ways:

The art of prose is employed in discourse; its substance is by nature significative; that is, the words are first of all not objects but designations for objects; it is not first of all a matter of knowing whether they please or displease in themselves, but whether they correctly indicate a certain thing or a certain notion. (20)

To speak is to act; anything which one names is already no longer quite the same; it has lost its innocence Thus, by speaking, I reveal the situation by my very intention of changing it; I reveal it to myself and to others in order to change it. I strike at its very heart, I transpierce it, and I display it in full view; at present I dispose of it; with every word I utter, I involve myself a little more in the world, and by the same token I emerge from it a little more, since I go beyond it toward the future. Thus, the prose-writer is a man who has chosen a certain method of secondary action which we may call action by disclosure The "engaged" writer knows that words are action. He knows that to reveal is to change and that one can reveal only by planning to change. He has given up the impossible dream of giving an impartial picture of society and the human condition. (22-23)

There are three significant points in Sartre's formulation of the concept of writing as engagement. Firstly, the function of engagement, for Sartre, is intricately and essentially determined by the medium or form adopted—it is prose against poetry and writing against painting or music. Secondly, the implication of writing as engagement includes both expression and action—"to speak is to act", to show the "intention of changing" and also "involve" oneself in the world as he says. Thirdly, and most importantly, the deepest level of relevance of writing as a mode of engagement lies in the realm of meaning and signification because words create "designations for objects" and they "reveal" things

and situations. Taken together these premises turn the act of writing into an essentially engaged mode of activity; writing does not simply deploy engagement, writing is engagement. Obviously, it is a view of writing or literature that may be seen as the exact antithesis of the previous view that literature as art is essentially non-pragmatic; for Sartre, writing (prose as he specifies) is essentially utilitarian and action/effect oriented.

Within the lineage of reflection on and analysis of the connection between literature/writing and engagement/commitment, Sartre's voice is uniquely echoed by another pioneer thinker writing in the next half of the century—Edward W. Said. Said's concept of "worldliness" developed in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* reflects, in many ways, the same belief in the necessity and desirability of supporting a relation of involvement and effectivity between writing, literature or criticism on the hand and the real world, the actual conditions of existence on the other. For Said, the question of the material or worldly determination of the text is crucial for revealing the political and ideological implications underlying its textual and epistemological function—a view that runs through his seminal research in *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). His idea of "worldliness" encapsulates these concerns to create a framework of textual and critical practice in which the focus lies in understanding textuality as essentially embedded within concrete, material and "worldly" elements of culture, history and power (*The World*, 39). He defines it in the following words:

Worldliness originally meant to me, at any rate, some location of oneself or one's work, or the work itself, the literary work, the text, and so on, in the world as opposed to some extra worldly, private ethereal context. Worldliness was meant to be a rather crude and bludgeon-like term to enforce the location of cultural practices back in the mundane, the quotidian, the secular. (qtd in Hussain 160)

The same concern with the issue of an engaged and empirical ethos of discursive practice is also foregrounded in Said's concept of the intellectual as an active oppositional figure whose worldly orientation makes him intervene and disrupt the prevailing structures of

power and knowledge and turns him into a “disturber of the status quo” (*Representations*, x). The political and discursive engagement is far stronger in Said’s conceptualization of the intellectual than the philosophically oriented engagement in Sartre’s “prose writer”. Interestingly, one such intellectual Said mentions is none other Sartre himself:

So in the end it is the intellectual as a representative figure that matters—someone who visibly represents a standpoint of some kind, and someone who makes articulate representations to his or her public despite all sorts of barriers. My argument is that intellectuals are individuals with a vocation for the art of representing, whether that is talking, writing, teaching, appearing on television. And the vocation is important to the extent that it is publicly recognizable and involves commitment and risk, boldness and vulnerability. (*Representations* 13)

Taken together, what Sartre and Said put forward is a re-framing of the very concept of literature in the broader connotation of writing and textuality as essentially engaged and involved modes of expression and action. It is a practice that is essentially determined by and responds to the specificities of time, place, history and culture. More importantly, such involvement and embedding in the “world”—a term that both the thinkers use—imply a level of interference with the structures of cognition and representation existing in the world within which writing operates; whereas for Sartre it takes the form of a philosophical concern with signification and meaning, for Said it involves issues of ideological and cultural production and power.

In the long run, such views can be seen as pointing towards the possibility of having a model of textual evaluation within which texts with overt and radical involvement with material specificities of history and culture may find a place. In other words, if such a framework forms the basis of the essay canon, accommodation of the political essay will follow naturally. It will serve as an alternative model within which the current practice of the essay canon of deradicalizing and decontextualizing political essays will be replaced

by a focus on those very qualities of radical and contextual determination. In fact, within such a probable essay canon guided by principles like engagement and worldliness the political essay will become the representative manifestation of the genre. What implications such a position holds for the reading of Arundhati Roy's political essays remains to be seen.

5.2 Essaying Politics : Reading Arundhati Roy's Essays

The first element to be negotiated in studying Roy's essays is nothing but the very concept of "politics". Even if the problem of accommodation is resolved by the application of the standards of evaluation belonging to a contextually and historically oriented academic paradigm, the analysis of the texts within that paradigm has to be informed by a clear understanding of the politics that identifies Roy's essays distinctively. Basically, "politics" can be conceptualized at two levels. Firstly, politics may be seen as an element of thematic specification—Roy's essays deal with different socio-political issues and hence can be comfortably categorized as "political essays". Secondly, politics can be understood as an orientation or approach insofar as Roy herself declared that her novel and her essays are equally political. None of these formulations of the political is invalid in relation to Roy's essays. However, they do not answer one important question: if the political is only a theme or style specific aspect and is common to Roy's fiction and essays then how to defend the centrality or uniqueness of the element in Roy's essays? In other words, how to justify Roy's move to the genre of the essay to focalize on the political if the same can be done in the form of the novel?

A probable route to the answer lies in understanding the overall character of Roy's essays. On the one hand these texts are marked by a highly methodical study of the empirical particulars related to the different socio-political issues Roy takes up as themes and on the other hand there is a thoroughly involved, passionate and affective mode of expression that is used to interrogate and analyze these issues. It indicates that a politically and sociologically informed body of knowledge regarding pressing

contemporary issues has been accommodated within the flexible and accessible form of the essay; it is a distinctive category that can be duly called the political essay because of this merging of the two elements. Naturally, the question arises as to what is achieved by this unique combination of objective public knowledge and subjective personal expression. As has been seen, the essay's elusive generic identity, in all its manifestations, is best captured in the ideological function that it performs; essay is best understood in terms of what it does rather than what it is or what it looks like. What is the function that the political essay performs as a form? And is that function integrally related to the element of the political in the political essay?

An indirect but valid explanation of this may be found in the discursive effect that the political essay creates. Interestingly, the most common effect that Roy's essays have created is of controversy and dismissal. In an article titled "The Arun Shourie of the Left" renowned historian Ramachandra Guha reacted to Roy's essay "The Greater Common Good" (written on the Narmada Bachao Andolan and the debate on construction of big dams) as a mode of intervention into a highly debated area of political and social concern and found it seriously lacking. Guha's dissatisfaction was caused by what he saw as an impassioned and over-imaginative intervention, on Roy's part, into a serious and sensitive area of specialized knowledge with an established history of academic research. He reacted by saying that "As a piece of literary craftsmanship it ["The Greater Common Good"] was self-indulgent and hyperbolic" and expressed strong irritation with Roy's mode of writing marked by "a conspicuous lack of proportion". At the end of the article Guha advised Roy to go back to writing novels and leave commenting on social movements. Guha's reaction is representative of a common line of criticism that Roy's essays have faced from diverse quarters. What at the bottom causes such criticism is Roy's "essayistic" breach of specialized academic traditions of research and writing. In other words, the personalized, impassioned and commonsensical treatment of issues otherwise seen as belonging to an exclusive sphere of specialized knowledge creates a sense of intrusion that turns the essays into objects of suspicion. What is most intriguing is the fact that on Roy's part the adoption of such a treatment is entirely conscious and intentional. What is then achieved by this apparently incongruous but intentionally

maintained balance between a subject matter taken from a specialized area of knowledge and its personalized treatment?

What is achieved is nothing less than an intervention into the very idea of a specialized or exclusive system of knowledge essentially attached to a specific and axiomatically determined mode of expression. In her essays Roy is handling issues which carry old and established academic scholarship and have themselves been considered parts of a specialized intellectual and pedagogic field. Though these are essentially political issues they also have been part of a supposedly objective, neutral and scientific tradition of research and study. More crucially, this pedagogic field and tradition of research has an established rhetoric of its own. Roy's essayistic discourse poses a direct challenge to the exclusivity and remoteness of these academic enterprises on the one hand and to their "scientific" and "objective" mode of analysis on the other. It means that Roy's essays engage in a highly subversive politics that disturb these discursive structures and their epistemological claims of providing correct and authoritative knowledge or information. These texts, as will be seen in the next section, expose the structures of power within which such knowledge is created and at the same time offer an alternative mode of enquiry from a personal and experiential perspective. At this point the discursive politics of Roy's essays becomes an effect of her activism; the engaged, involved and committed approach Roy brings to her essayistic treatment of various public and political issues stems from her personal involvement as an activist with the same.

Politics in Roy's essays, then, is not a simple matter of engagement with political issues or a style dictated by political consciousness, rather it is a complex and subversive engagement with the politics of knowledge formation itself. The use of the essay form in such a project is justified by two factors. Firstly, the essay, as Theodore Adorno claimed, is essentially related to the overall politics of liberalism and unorthodoxy and secondly, in Roy's case, the simplistic, accessible and intimate nature of the genre makes it the most suitable vehicle for carrying resistance to the specialized, exclusive and objectivist claims of absolute and correct knowledge—a resistance that functions by foregrounding the personal and the situational over the objective and the universal. As Roy herself said:

One is not involved by virtue of being a writer or activist. One is involved because one is a human being. Writing about it happens to be the most effective thing a writer can do . . . A writer is a citizen, only one of many, who is demanding public information, asking for a public explanation. It is vital to de-professionalize the public debate on matters that vitally affect the lives of ordinary people. It's time to snatch our futures back from the 'experts'. Time to ask, in ordinary language, the public questions and to demand in ordinary language, the public answer. ("Ladies Have Feelings", 210)

How such a project of political and epistemological resistance is materialized in Roy's essays will be seen in the next section through a reading of three essays—"The End of Imagination", "The Road to Harsud", and "Walking with the Comrades".

"The End of Imagination" was originally published in *Outlook* on August 3, 1998 and was later included as the leading piece in the first anthology of Roy's essays *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* published in 2001. This thirty eight pages long essay was Roy's instantaneous critical response to the nuclear tests conducted by India at Pokhran in 1998. Though more than a decade old, the text remains crucial for understanding the overall character of Roy's essays because it stands paradigmatic of Roy's oppositional essayism. At one level it is a simple text insofar as it is run by a single approach of direct, unambiguous and unapologetic criticism of the tests—a criticism that borders on an attack on both the concept of nuclear testing and on India's involvement in the practice. However, the depth of the analysis that Roy undertakes in the essay reveals itself in a complex amalgamation of various perspectives from which the criticism is directed. Roy undertakes an analysis of the tests from political, historical, psychological and, most importantly, humanitarian perspectives. This complexity of approach is itself a criticism of the simplistic and monolithic adulation that was bestowed on the tests from all concerned quarters. The final point of focus rests on exposing the politically and

ideologically predetermined character of such discourses of praise, pride and achievement that turns the nuclear tests into a symbol of power.

The complexity of Roy's treatment is also reflected in the pattern in which the argument moves and the way in which the various perspectives Roy brings to bear on the issue are bound in one argument. The essay starts with a blatant description of the actual physical implications of possessing a potential nuclear bomb against the abstract conceptualization of the same by standards of power and defense. Roy gives a detailed description of the kind and extent of material destruction a nuclear explosion may cause. It automatically leads to the question as to why, even at the risk of so much of destruction, the tests are conducted with so much enthusiasm. Roy finds the cause of this in the theory of Deterrence—the widely accepted idea that nuclear weapons are simply maintained as a mode of defense but are not meant to be used. Roy's answer to this comes in the form of a surprisingly lucid argument that debunks, point for point, the basic political premises on which the theory is based. Next, Roy brings to notice the euphoria that erupted on all fronts regarding the tests and the grounds that were offered, mainly by the government but also by experts and scientists, for the need and benefits of possessing nuclear weapons. Roy provides a detailed critical analysis of the implications of these suppositions which prove that none of them are actually valid. What then is the reason that has sustained the defense of the tests even in the face of such clear misconceptions regarding its nature?

As an answer Roy offers an explanation that reveals a complex interplay of psychological, historical and political reasons informing India's and Indians' identity: the bomb was turned into a symbol of power to fill in the persistent sense of identity loss Indians have been carrying since colonization. But, more importantly, the whole process of connecting the bomb with the idea of national pride and identity is channelized through different strategies of persuasion adopted by the political parties in power—strategies that ultimately meets the political interests of these people in power. Roy dismantles this final ground in favor of the bomb by negating the very idea of a single monolithic and pure nationhood and draws attention to the actual history behind the

formation of that nationhood through the mingling of innumerable ethnic and racial groups and cultures. Roy's concluding emphasis, however, lies in the need of the availability of realistic and correct knowledge for common people regarding serious issues like this because ultimately the effects will be humanitarian and will be borne by them.

As becomes apparent from this overview of the essay's argument that the text does not simply work as a critique of the tests, rather it works as an alternative and revelatory discourse on the issue that subverts the claims of the widely accepted and authoritative views in favor of the process. The power of this counter-discourse lies in its highly analytical insight into the implications of the very claims that it dismantles; as has been seen the text's movement follows a rhythm of description, analysis and debunking involving all the major arguments in favor of the tests. The effectivity of the text also lies in the fact that it puts forward its critique through a highly layered introspection of all the factors concerned, scientific, political, psychological and discursive. Interestingly this highly innovative and exceptionally well-augmented essay has consistently faced criticism due to its mode of expression; it has been claimed that the essay is too emotive, personal and hyperbolic to be a proper interrogation of an issue of such highly professional and specialized nature. In the aforementioned article by Ramachandra Guha this text was also criticized, along with "The Greater Common Good" for the writer's style in which "an excess of emotion and indignation drowns out the facts." Similarly, Sudhir Kumar attacks Roy's "wordy activism" in an issue where the argument should have been "solely grounded in the matter-of-fact situations" and criticizes the way "the essay threw up a lava of pity, terror, horror, anger and ready-made compassion mixed with a designer self-righteousness . . ." (356).

The core of the essay, however, lies in resisting the very givenness of ideas like "*the facts*" and "*matter-of-fact situations*". Roy's aim is to reveal the highly political nature of the process through which explanations and impressions related to such strategic issues are bestowed with the exclusive status of truth and are then imparted to the common people with the authority of knowledge. The use of a language which is emotive and

personal in nature is essentially related to this project of dismantling the claims of dispassionate and objectivist knowledge stemming from exclusive and specialized discursive structures. If Roy's thoroughly oppositional stance in the essay can be termed a kind of counter-discourse that stands against the prevailing official discourse in favor of the tests then it has to be understood that it counters the hegemonic discourse both in terms of the latter's truth claims as well as the modes in which such claims are made. In other words the personalized and passionate mode of writing is a way of opening up an alternative approach to the whole issue where the apparent axiomatic and objective truth of officially validated propositions are brought down to questionable subjective particulars.

There are two primary ways in which Roy achieves such a critical effect in this essay. The first one involves the placing of commonsensical and particular observations or questions that debunk the generalized and abstract discourse of official and expert claims:

“‘The desert shook,’ the Government of India informed us (its people).

“‘The whole mountain turned white,’ the Government of Pakistan replied .

...

May 1998. It will go down in history books, *provided, of course, we have history books to go down in. Provided, of course, we have a future.*(3)

These are not just nuclear tests, they are nationalism tests, we are repeatedly told. This has been hammered home, over and over again. The bomb is India, India is bomb. Not just India, Hindu India. Therefore, be warned, any criticism of it is not just anti-national, but anti-Hindu. (*Of course, in Pakistan the bomb is Islamic.* Other than that, politically, same physics applies.) (18) (emphases added).

The effect that these kinds of observations create is that of a sharp and complete debunking of the whole aura of greatness or uniqueness related to the tests. At the same

time they point at the incongruous conceptual core underlying the apparently confident and stable claims from quarters of authority. These moves of exposing the latent gaps in the logic used to support the tests are further strengthened by comments that personalize the whole issue and consequently make its humanitarian implications palpable. These, in their turn, break the impression of an exclusively public or political significance attached with the idea:

Our cities and forests, our fields and our villages will burn for days. . . .
.The earth will be enveloped in darkness. There will be no day. Only interminable night. Temperatures will drop to far below freezing and nuclear winter will set in Most living things, animal and vegetable, fish and fowl, will die. Only rats and cockroaches will breed and multiply and compete with foraging

What shall we do then, those of us who are still alive? Burned and blind and bald and ill, carrying the cancerous carcasses of our children in our arms, where shall we go? What shall we eat? What shall we drink? What shall we breathe? (6) (emphasis added)

These modes of personalization and concretization have continued to be the distinguishing marks Roy's essays. As has been seen, these are highly political discursive modes that challenge and break open the apparently seamless surface of accepted versions of truth which themselves are created by political and ideological power. However, the intensity and richness of Roy's aggressively political essayism acquired more maturity as her activism became more direct and involved. Whereas her criticism of the nuclear tests worked purely at the level of discourse and hence was called "wordy activism", essays that she has written in support of social movements carry a clear sense of concrete and material authenticity stemming from her active physical involvement in the same. One of the causes Roy has been supporting for over a decade is that of the mass movements protesting against the big dam projects in the Narmada valley ; it is one of

the most important activist projects in terms of representation in Roy's writing, "The Greater Common Good" being one of the most well known of her essays. "The Road to Harsud" is one of the lesser known pieces that Roy has written on the issue. It originally appeared in *Outlook* on July 26, 2004 and was later included in the anthology *An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire* in 2005. Harsud, as Roy introduces it in the beginning of the essay, is a seven hundred year old town in Madhya Pradesh which is under threats of submergence because of the Narmada Sagar Dam. It is one of the places where the resistance of the Narmada Bachao Andolan has not been able to reach and consequently the policies of the government favoring the construction of the dam and displacement of the local people have continued unhindered. Roy's essay has been written on the basis of her visit to the town at a time when the local inhabitants have already started deserting the town under government instruction.

The severe and all-round social criticism that is characteristic of Roy's political essayism is accompanied, in this essay, by a discursive shape that is unique and intelligent at the same time. The essay can be neatly divided into three parts; the first and the third parts contain highly detailed and up-to-date information of all the developments, problems and controversies regarding the project; these parts are rich in data. The second part works as a connecting link between the other two parts and also as a contrast to both. The contrast lies in the fact that against the descriptive and analytic first and the third part the second part is written in the form of an eye witness account describing the actual material condition of the town and its people; it is personal and emotive. It is easy to see that Roy is using a far more effective strategy of criticism and persuasion here by introducing an account that concretizes and humanizes an issue otherwise discussed and apprehended in standard discourse through abstract categories of "development", "displacement", "progress" etc. Roy's extremely detailed account of the physical condition of the place and its people make the implications of the whole process palpable.

Interestingly, however, the effectivity of the intimate and authentic immediacy of description in the second part of the essay itself stems from the contrast that it puts

against the dispassionate and matter-of-fact recording of public data incorporated in the first part. The meticulousness is impressive, and more importantly, convincing:

The 92 meter high Narmada Sagar (262 meters above Mean Sea Level, which is the way dam heights are usually referred to) is the second highest of the many large dams on the Narmada . . . The reservoir of the Narmada Sagar is designed to be the largest in India. In order to irrigate 123,000 hectares of land it will submerge 91,000hectares! This includes 41,000hectares of prime dry deciduous forest, 249 villages and the town of Harsud. According to the Detailed Project Report 30,000 hectares of the land in the Narmada Sagar command was already irrigated in 1982. Odd math wouldn't you say? (244)

Roy is employing a very intelligent strategy here; she is using the “factual” and “scientific” rhetoric of official discourses that function to dehumanize and generalize humane cases into impersonal countable figures but her use is directed towards exposing the truth claims of such discourses (B. Ghosh 140-42). A very important basis of the absolutist suppositions formed within the discourses of power is their supposed authenticity so far as they are constructed and represented in the form of “objective” information. A primary mode of such representation is statistics which, as is well known, forms the core of most of the assessment and analysis coming from quarters of authority, governmental and others. It is used to create an impression of impenetrable and unquestionable factuality around issues so that any other analysis that is not based on statistical data looks inadequate and unscientific. At the same time, the use of statistics keeps the formation of such supposedly authoritative accounts within the boundaries of specialized zones of knowledge and information as accessing and interpreting data involves technical expertise. Roy's move aims at attacking such a strategy with its own weapon. She uses specific and detailed data from official sources—references are made to studies conducted by The Indian Institute of Science and The Wild Life Institute as well as the statistics put forwarded by the government and its allies like the National

Hydroelectric Power Corporation etc. However, Roy's assessment and analysis remain critical and independent so that the statistical data and the claims made on their basis are brought to scrutiny in terms of their real-life implications instead of being accepted as mark of proved objective "truth":

When (if) the project is fully built, the NHPC says it will generate an annual average of 1950 million units of power. For the sake of argument, let's accept that figure. Madhya Pradesh currently loses 44.2 per cent of its electricity—12 billion units a year in transmission and distribution losses. That's the equivalent of six Narmada Sagar. If the Madhya Pradesh government could work towards saving even half its current transmission and distribution losses, it could generate power equal to three Narmada Sagar projects, at a third cost, with none of the social and ecological devastation. (247)

How far Roy's assessment is correct has been a crucial point of debate and controversy. What is undoubtedly remarkable, however, is the effectivity of her discourse as an alternative route of exploration on issues where versions of analysis coming from official sources of power create an aura of a closed and final verdict.

This alternative version is supported by Roy's description of Harsud's and its inhabitants' condition after evacuation starts following government orders. The mode of expression changes from the precise and impersonal recording of data to an emotive and evocative description of the place and its people caught in utter chaos, hopelessness and injustice. The level of involvement moves from a general empathic observation of the people to encounters with specific cases of loss and misery:

Behind the blind buffalo, silhouetted against the sky, *the bare bones of a broken town*. A town turned inside out, its privacy ravaged, its innards exposed. Personal belongings, beds, cupboards, clothes, photographs, pots and pans lie on

the street. . . .an infant swaddled in a sari-crib sways gently, fast asleep in a doorway in a free-standing wall. *Leading from nowhere to nowhere* . . . the insides of houses lie rudely exposed. Its strange to see how a bleached, colorless town on the outside, was vibrant on the inside, the walls every shade of turquoise, emerald, lavender, fuchsia. (251)

. . . . He said his name was Kallu driver. I am glad I met him. . . .He used to be a driver, fifteen years ago he lost his leg in an accident. He lived alone in Harsud. He had been given a check for Rs. 25,000 in exchange for demolishing his mud hut He had been to Chhanera three times to try and cash his check. He ran out of money for bus fare. The fourth time he walked. The Bank sent him away asked him to come after three days. He showed us how his wooden leg had chipped and splintered. He said every night officials threatened him and tried to make him move to new Harsud . . . *Kallu driver does not need to read newspapers or court affidavits . . . to know which side he's on.* Each time anybody mentioned government officials, or Digvijay Singh or Uma Bharati, he cursed. (274)(emphases added).

What Roy is doing here is connecting specialized and expert knowledge and planning to their unavoidable humane and material implications. As Ranjan Ghosh says, Roy is performing a unique “writerly” duty of connecting “the disjunctures that yank open the lines of separation between ordinary people and the things that happen to them”. It is performed through the writer’s ability “to make knowledge less classified and discriminatory—worthily endowed to disempower the specialists who would segmentize knowledge for sectarian use and make people unaware of their real conditions of existence unless explained and made available” (182). The criticism of Roy’s activism by academicians like Ramachandra Guha is based on the idea that her writing (to be more

specific her essays)—which is the vehicle of her activism—falls short of discursive requirements specific to the negotiations of social issues and does not meet the standards of serious committed writing. Roy on the other hand considers that very impression of falling short as the most quintessential marker of her politics and her writing insofar as she uses it as a means to disturb the idea of any axiomatically available mode of specialized expression. While reacting to Guha’s criticism Roy asserted:

My Language, my style, is not something superficial, like a coat that I wear when I go out. My style is me—it’s the way I think. My style *is* my politics I am hysterical. I am screaming from the bloody rooftops. And he [Guha] is going *Shhhh ... you’ll wake the neighbours!* But I want to wake the neighbours, that’s my whole point. I want everybody to open their eyes. (Roy, “A Writer’s Place” 185-87)

For Roy, as well as for Roy’s essaying, this unique convergence of activism and/as writing remains the defining marker of the “political”. A far more intense level of activism is exercised by Roy in her stay with the Maoists in the forest of Dandakaranya in Dantewada, Chhattisgarh, which she records in the essay “Walking with the Comrades”. The whole experience with its secrecy, its risks and its thrill is the most unusual among Roy’s various expeditions to sites of protests and mass movements all over India. Whereas in her activist involvements with bodies like the Narmada Bachao Andolan Roy formed a part of an already organized group of people sharing the same concerns and following a long standing tradition of protest, in the journey with the Maoists Roy goes through a unique, exclusive and lonely experience which she later shares through her essay. At the same time the responsibility of representation becomes an extremely sensitive issue here as the Maoist movement has always been related to violence and hence has been a hateful enterprise in the minds of the common people as against the morally upright image of other mass movements. The moral and intellectual challenge, for Roy, in this case, is to maintain a balance between forming a correct historical and political perspective on the reasons behind the rise of the movement and keeping a distance from its policy of armed violence. Roy concentrates more on the former and for

that adopts a way of reporting that works at three levels. At the primary level, at the beginning of the essay, Roy provides a historical account of the conditions in post independence India that led to the rise of the movement in the first place. At the next level, spanning the major part of the essay, lies an account of Roy's experience with the Maoists—an account that reads like a travel narrative in its eye for detail, its description of people and places and its highly sensitive portrayal of individuals. At the third level a history of the rise of the movement as described by one of its leaders is recorded and reported.

Through these different levels Roy's focus remains on providing an alternative account of the movement delivered from the perspective of the people involved as against the established official verdict on it as a national security threat and as an instance of violent insurgency. Roy starts by analyzing and exposing the injustice, violence and deprivation inflicted by the government on the tribal people of India throughout history which has caused people to rise to such violent movements but which has been kept hidden from common public knowledge. She connects the present with the past:

The antagonists in the forest are disparate and unequal in almost every way. On one side is a massive paramilitary force armed with money, the firepower, the media, and the hubris of an emerging Superpower. On the other, ordinary villagers armed with traditional weapons The Maoists and the paramilitary are old adversaries and fought older avatars of each other several times before: Telengana in the 50s, West Bengal, Bihar, Srikakulam in Andhra Pradesh in the late '60s and '70s and then again in Andhra Pradesh, Bihar and Maharastra from the '80s all the way through the present.

Roy points out to various instances in history where tribal people from different parts of the country were dispossessed and exploited by the Indian government in the name of welfare and progress and which led to armed rebellions and protests many a times in

history even before the rise of the Maoist movement. However even such historical perspective provides only partial understanding. Roy's entry into the prohibited world of the Maoists, located deep inside the jungle, provides the rest of the answer.

The description of the experience is remarkable for the immediacy and authenticity of expression. Roy describes the mysterious but widely spread network of workers and organizations that forms the core of the rebellion and their way of functioning. The most remarkable aspect of this whole account is the way Roy creates a sense of familiar and intimate human connection with the Maoists and their difficult and risky life-style. She describes the leaders in detail as she interacts with them closely, stays with them and shares their food. The whole image of a violent armed rebellion is covered by the picture of a simple but strong group of people deprived and harassed in their own land. In Roy's account the human side of the whole issue comes to the fore in the form of particular individuals and their predicaments instead of umbrella categories like "rebel" or "insurgent" though she maintains a sensitive balance between forging a honest human bond with them and keeping a distance from their belief in or use of violence:

About twenty young people arrive, girls and boys. In their teens and early twenties. Chandu explains that this is the village-level militia, the lowest rung of the Maoists' military hierarchy. I have never seen anyone like them before. They are dressed in sarees and lungis . . . Every one of them has a muzzle-loading rifle . . . war doesn't seem to be uppermost on their minds . . . They are full of fun and curiosity.(56)

Over dinner I meet Comrade Narmada, in charge of the Krantikari Adivasi Mahila Sangathan (KAMS), who has a price on her head; Comrade Saroja of the PLGA, who is only as tall as her SLR; Comrade Masse, who has a price on her head too . . . Between us we speak Gondi, Halbi, Telegu, Punjabi and Malayalam. Only Masse speaks English.

Comrade Masse is tall and quiet and seems to have swim through a layer of pain to enter the conversation. But from the way she hugs me I can tell she's a reader. And that she misses having books in the jungle. She will tell me her story only later. When she trusts me with her grief. (62)

I feel I ought to say something at this point. About the futility of violence, about the unacceptability of summary executions. But what should I suggest they do? Go to court? Do a dharna in JantarMantar, New Delhi? A rally? A relay hunger strike? It sounds ridiculous. The promoters of the New Economic Policy should be asked to suggest an alternative Resistance Policy. A specific one, to these specific people, in this specific forest. Here. Now. Which party should they vote for? Which democratic institution in this country should they approach? Which door did the Narmada Bachao Andolan *not* knock on during the years and years it fought against Big Dams on the Narmada? (88)

In the long run "Walking with the Comrades" does the same thing as the other essays. It opens up an alternative route to knowledge about a reality which has already been categorized and denominated within one single frame of reference. Roy's criticism is directed against the one-sided and biased construction of an image of a group of people whose background, when analyzed, reveal severe instances of injustice and violence by the state. The personalized and intimate account of Roy's encounter with these people serves to throw light on their side of the story, their history. She does not pose it as the correct version but stresses the necessity of questioning official versions of truth and reality in favor of opening up ways for alternative perspectives to enter.

The “politics” of Arundhati Roy’s political essays can be understood at several levels. They are political because, at the simplest level of connotation, they are thematized on political issues; they can be called political because they carry the political stand of their writer on these issues and most importantly they prove to be political because they engage with the core political sphere of discursive politics and the politics of power. However, beyond all these the politics that lies at the core of the political essay as a form is that of writing itself—it is the politics of an introspective and critical consciousness responding to the intricacies of knowledge, responsibility and art. At this level the political essay becomes the representative form of an alternative conception of writing, literature and art. It is a view that holds literary or artistic imagination itself as grounded and material, as unavoidably shaped by conditions of existence. More importantly the political essay, at this level, becomes the form that represents the right and the responsibility of the writer to intervene in areas of knowledge that are otherwise closed for common humanity. It turns writing into activism because “the knowledge that the writer generates, the passion that she whips up, the ‘thinking’ that she inscribes and interpolates in society lead her to define and help function the public space” (R. Ghosh 182). In the final analysis, the political essay deals with the most basic politics of formation and dissemination of nothing less than knowledge itself.

In this highly focused and characteristically serious avatar of the political essay, the typically essayistic qualities of simple personal expression and easy familiar references seem to be completely lost. Judged against the traditionally accepted idea and image of the essay, in fact, these texts hardly seem to be essays at all. From another angle, however, the political essay seems to be the strongest manifestation of the essayistic principle of the personal. As has been discussed in relation to Roy’s essays, the politics in the political essay is neither a simple matter of thematic preference nor a support/critique of specific political issues. The political, within a text that can be called a political essay, becomes a principle of textual intervention into and, at times, subversion of discursive structures. Interestingly, the channel that the political adopts to manifest itself within an essayistic text is nothing other than the core essay principle of the personal. In other words, the political essay bridges the apparent contradiction between being political and

being essay by highlighting the latent political core always already present in the personal. In so doing, the political essay achieves something that no other form of the essay appears to be able to achieve: on the one hand, it points towards the infinite possibilities hidden in the essay form by revealing its most casually received trait—the principle of the personal—to be a signifier of most serious intentions, and, on the other hand, it points toward the very origin of the essay six hundred years ago, when Michael de Montaigne devised the genre to take on every subject in the world simply by talking about himself, by being personal.

In a strange way, then, in this most neglected manifestation of the always-already marginalized genre of the essay the original Montaignian core of epistemological enquiry of knowledge, truth and existence seems to come full circle. The need to break open the restrictive and elite circle of abstruse knowledge by a direct, honest and lived appropriation of experience was at the core of the essay as a formal and epistemological category. The political essay's interrogation of the conditions of existence guided by an insight into the intricacies of knowledge and truth seems to be a time and history specific avatar of this eternal essayistic principle. At the same time, it leaves the indication, for those who want to see, of the endless cycles in which this protean genre of the essay moves through time and place and still remains connected to life and art.