

# 'Writing fiction is a prayer, a song'

After 20 years, Arundhati Roy, out with her second novel, says she is not going to let some idiots disrupt the moment and snatch all the headlines



ZAC O'YEAH

Arundhati Roy opens her door and lets me in—into her kitchen. I wonder if I've knocked on the wrong door: the delivery entrance, perhaps? I quickly hand over the humble gift of fresh coffee beans I've brought her, on the assumption that all serious writers love coffee.

As we sit down around her solid wood kitchen table surrounded by funky chairs, I realise the kitchen is the warm heart of her self-designed apartment in central New Delhi. Apart from long work counters, there's a sofa, a bookshelf, a sit-out terrace with an antique-looking bench; altogether a place where one could spend a lifetime.

But right now, she's somewhat jet-lagged after having just flown in from New York. Following interviews in town, she will soon be off again on a worldwide promotion tour for her new novel. The Ministry of Utmost Happiness is her first in two decades since the globally best-selling, Booker Prize-winning, *The God of Small Things*. According to her publishers, "It re-invents what a novel can do and can be".

I've started reading it and can say that it is a ruthlessly probing and wide-ranging narrative on contemporary India, written with a linguistic felicity that reminds me of Salman Rushdie's classic *Midnight's Children*. It makes interviewing her an intimidating prospect. While she makes coffee, I rig up my electronic defences consisting of three audio recorders (two of which conk out during the interview) and a back-up video camera. We embark on a three-hour interview session.

Excerpts:

Generations of new Indian writers have seen you as an inspiration, as someone who allowed them to dream that one could sit in India and write and then be read all over the world. How does your iconic status feel to you?

■ I am equally balanced by the kind of rage and craziness that I evoke. For me, I live inside my work.

Although I must say that I was thinking at some point about writers who like to remain anonymous—but I've never been that person. Because, in this country, it is important, especially as a woman, to say: 'Hey! Here I am! I am going to take you on! And this is what I think and I'm not going to hide.' So if I have helped to give courage to anybody... to step out of line... that's lovely.

I think it is very important for us to say: 'We can! And we will! And don't f\*\*\* with us!'

I've noticed that you don't often appear at literary festivals. There are more than a hundred in India these days, and I've been to quite a few myself, but never met you. Do you keep away from other writers?

■ It's not about other writers. The thing is that the Jaipur Literature Festival is funded by a kind of notorious mining company that is silencing the voices of Adivasis, kicking them out of their homes, and now it is also funded by Zee TV, which

is half the time paying for my blood. So, on principle, I won't go.

How can you be silencing and snuffing out the voices of the poorest people, and then become this glittering platform for free speech and flying writers all around the place? I have a problem with that.

Do you read a lot of new Indian fiction or non-fiction?

■ When I've been writing this book, I haven't been very up on current events. I think that when you're writing, you tend to be a bit strange about reading: sometimes I'm not reading whole books, I'm dipping into things to check my own sanity. (She waves her left hand in a kind of elegantly psych-

delic mudra before her face.) Am I on the same planet?

Is there any particular Indian writer whom you admire?

■ I'm not really that influenced by anybody, you know. I have to say that I find it incredible that writers in India, or almost all Indian writers, or at least the well-known writers... Let's not say writers, but there's been a level of eliding of things that have been at the heart of society, like caste. You see, there is something very wrong here. It is like people in apartheid South Africa writing without mentioning that there is apartheid.

Your writing is hard-hitting and outspoken—have you faced any repercussions?

■ My god, that's to put it mildly. Other than, of course, going to jail and all that. Even now, when the last book of essays (*Broken Republic*) was released in Delhi, a gang of vigilantes came on stage, and smashed it up. The right wing, the mobs, vigilantes, they are there at every meeting, threatening violence, threatening all kinds of things.

Have you ever felt that you should leave India and live in a country where you don't have to face such problems?

■ Everything that I know is here! Everyone that I know! And I've never really lived outside, abroad, so the idea of going to live all alone in some strange country is also terrifying. But right now, I think India is poised in an extremely dangerous place. There are just these mobs that decide who should be killed, who should be shot, who should be lynched, you know? I think it is probably the first time that people in India, writers and other people, are facing the kind of trauma that people have faced in Chile and Latin America.

Do you anticipate upsetting people with the new book?

■ To me, this book is not a thinly veiled political essay masquerading as a novel; it is a novel

■ I've written a book and it's taken me 10 years to write it, and there are 30 countries in the world where the biggest publishers are publishing it. I'm not going to allow some idiots to come and disrupt it and snatch all the headlines. Why should I? It is not about their little brains, it is about literature.

It has to be protected and tactically done in this climate.

Let's talk about the book. What was it that made you publish a new novel after spending 20 years being a public intellectual?

■ Well, this novel has been 10 years in the writing, but I think in the 20 years between *The God of Small Things* and now, I have travelled and been involved with so many things that are happening, and written about them at length.

There was this huge sense of urgency when I was writing the political essays, each time you wanted to blow a space open, on any issue. But fiction takes its time and is layered.

The insanity of what is going on in a place like Kashmir: how do you describe the terror in the air there? It is not just a human rights report about how many people have been killed and where. How do you describe the psychosis of what is going on? Except through fiction.

So that is why you chose...

■ But it is not that. I didn't choose to write fiction because I wanted to say something about Kashmir, but fiction chooses you. I don't think it is that simple that I had some information to impart and therefore I wanted to write a book. Not at all. It is a way of seeing. A way of thinking, it is a prayer, it is a song.

In the book you use a remarkably poetic language to talk about the

harsh subjects.

■ Language is something so natural to you, you know, not something you can manufacture, not for me.

Having studied architecture, you must have, at some point, thought of that as your field, while today you are one of the most celebrated novelists on the planet. What does your interest in language stem from?

■ Actually, the idea of language was far before architecture, because in a way architecture came to me as a very pragmatic thing. The relationship with language was there from the time I was very, very young. The only thing is that it didn't seem possible that I would ever be in a position to be a writer.

Why not?

■ No money... In the early years of my life, my only ambition was to survive somehow, pay my rent. So it didn't seem like there'd ever be that time where you could actually sit and write something because you'd be so busy earning. It was just a question of: How do you survive?

How did you survive then?

■ I used to live in this little hole-in-the-wall near the Nizamuddin Dargah and hire a bicycle for a rupee a day to go to work. All my time I spent thinking about money.

So then the writing really started with the film scripts?

■ Basically after *Annie* (In *Which Annie Gives It Those Ones*, 1989)—a film that just made its own secret little pathways into the world away from the big hit films—I wrote a second film called *Electric Moon* and then *The God of Small Things*. And after that, the essays.

And now you're making a fiction comeback. Was there any particular idea or incident that triggered off the new book? It seems

to be a meditation on the state of the nation.

■ (She takes a large sip of coffee and rubs her eyes.) It's a meditation, let's say, just a meditation. Always, some things spark something and, I think, in my case, I don't think what sparks it is necessarily what it's about.

Obviously, so many years of one's life and thinking and encounters and all that... but I think one of those nights that I used to spend in front of Jantar Mantar with all these (protesters) who come there, a baby did appear, and people were asking: 'What to do?' Nobody was sure what to do. So that was one of the things.

I recall that sequence in the novel, and you also narrate many of the individual stories behind the characters you meet at Jantar Mantar?

■ As you can imagine, with any writer who writes a "successful" book, everybody wants to sign contracts and give you lots of money... and I didn't want that. I wanted to experiment.

I wanted to write a book in which I don't walk past anyone, even the smallest child, or woman, but sit down, smoke a cigarette, have a chat.

It is not a story with a beginning, middle and an end, as much as a map of a city or a building. Or like the structure of a classical raga, where you have these notes and you keep exploring them from different angles, in different ways, different ups, different downs.

But how much autobiographical detail do you use in your writing?

■ It is hard to say, because where does your imagination

There were two phases in writing this book, one was about generating the smoke, and then it's like sculpting it

end and your experience begin? It is all a soup. Like in *The God of Small Things*, when Esthappen says, "If in a dream you've eaten fish, does it mean you've eaten fish?" Or if you're happy in a dream, does it count? To me, this book is not a thinly veiled political essay masquerading as a novel; it is a novel.

And in novels, everything gets processed and sweated out on your skin, it has to become part of your DNA and it is as complicated as anything that lives inside your body.

On that note, let me ask: in the years you worked on the novel, did you get tired of it at some point or were you happily engrossed in it for an entire decade?

■ When I write fiction, I have a very easy relationship with it in the sense that I'm not in a hurry. Partly, I really want to see if it will live with me, you know, for long. If I got fed up with it, I would leave it and imagine the world would get fed up too. I need to develop a relationship with it almost like... (She goes quiet.)

Like with another human perhaps?

■ Or a group of humans. We all live together.

Nerdy question time: Are there any rituals you have to go through, like putting on a jazz record or uncorking a bottle of Old Monk before you start writing?

■ Let's say, when I was breaking the stones and really trying to understand what I was trying to do, I would never be able to work for very long, just a few hours a day. There were two phases in writing this book, one was about generating the smoke, and then it's like sculpting it, none of which is the same as writing and re-writing, or making drafts. But when you're generating the smoke, it would be like—I could write three sentences and then just fall asleep out of exhaustion. But when the book was finally clear to me, I'd be working long hours. It was the same with *The God of Small Things*, there would be that single sentence which would send me to sleep. Like a strange trance almost.

Vikram Chandra once told me how he adapted a construction project management software, used by architects and builders to control the supply chains and all that, to plan and track all the elements in his novel *Sacred Games*. As a trained architect, do you plan your writing like that?

■ Oh god! There's no algorithm involved in my writing, it is all instinctive... rhythm.

What's a good writing day like then?

■ I don't seem to have any rituals as such; it is just a very open encounter between me and myself and my writing. I don't actually understand what we mean by "when you write" because I kind of wonder when am I not writing? I am always writing inside my head!

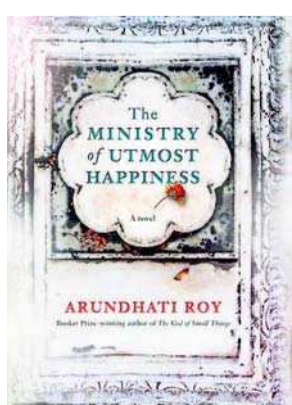
But right now, I feel almost like if I weighed myself, I'd be half my weight, because the last 10 years it's just been in my head, all the time! At least now (she points to the book on the kitchen table), it is with me, but it is not on the weighing scale. You know?

What do you do then when you celebrate a good writing day or a well done story? Do you open a bottle of Old Monk?

■ (Bursts out laughing.) You're just stuck on your Old Monk! No, I... I think I just float around.

(Full text online)

(Zac O'Yeah's latest comic detective novel set in Bengaluru is the bestselling *Hari, a Hero for Hire*)



The Ministry of Utmost Happiness: A Novel; Arundhati Roy, Penguin Random House, 599.