

The End of Imagination

Arundhati Roy

Arundhati Roy, famous as the Booker Prize-winning author of The God of Small Things, is not so well-known as a foremost campaigner against nuclear weapons in the Indian subcontinent. But she contributed this introduction to New Nukes: India, Pakistan and Global Nuclear Disarmament, an impressive analysis of the nuclear era by Praful Bidwai and Achin Vanaik, just published by Signal Books, with whose kind permission we reproduce it. A full review of this important book will appear in our next number.

'The desert shook, the Government of India informed us (its people).

'The whole mountain turned white, the Government of Pakistan replied.

'By afternoon the wind had fallen silent over Pokharan. At 3.45pm, the timer detonated the three devices. Around 200 to 300 meters deep in the earth, the heat generated was equivalent to a million degrees centigrade – as hot as temperatures on the sun. Instantly, rocks weighing around a thousand tons, a mini mountain underground, vaporised . . . shockwaves from the blast began to lift a mound of earth the size of a football field by several meters. One scientist on seeing it said, "I can now believe stories of Lord Krishna lifting a hill".'

– *India Today*

May 1998. It'll go down in history books, provided of course we have history books to go down in. Provided, of course, we have a future.

There's nothing new or original left to be said about nuclear weapons. There can be nothing more humiliating for a writer of fiction to have to do than restate a case that has, over the years, already been made by other people in other parts of the world, and made passionately, eloquently, and knowledgeably.

I am prepared to grovel. To humiliate myself abjectly, because, in the circumstances, silence would be indefensible. So those of you who are willing: let's pick our parts, put on these discarded costumes and speak our second-hand lines in this sad second-hand play. But let's not forget that the stakes we're playing for are huge. Our fatigue and our shame could mean the end of us. The end of our children and our children's children. Of everything we love. We have to reach within ourselves and find the strength to think. To fight.

Once again we are pitifully behind the times – not just scientifically and technologically (ignore the hollow claims) but more pertinently in our ability to grasp the true nature of nuclear weapons. Our Comprehension of the Horror Department is hopelessly obsolete. Here we are, all of us in India and in Pakistan, discussing

the finer points of politics and foreign policy, behaving for all the world as though our governments have just devised a newer, bigger bomb, a sort of immense hand grenade with which they will annihilate the enemy (each other) and protect us from all harm.

How desperately we want to believe that. What wonderful, willing, well-behaved, gullible subjects we have turned out to be. The rest of humanity may not forgive us, but then the rest of the rest of humanity, depending on who fashions its views, may not know what a tired, dejected, heart-broken people we are. Perhaps it doesn't realise how urgently we need a miracle. How deeply we yearn for magic.

If only, if *only* nuclear war was just another kind of war. If only it was about the usual things – nations and territories, gods and histories. If only those of us who dread it are worthless moral cowards who are not prepared to die in defence of our beliefs. If only nuclear war was the kind of war in which countries battle countries, and men battle men. But it isn't. If there is a nuclear war, our foes will not be China or America or even each other. Our foe will be the earth herself. Our cities and forests, our fields and villages will burn for days. Rivers will turn to poison. The air will become fire. The wind will spread the flames. When everything there is to burn has burned and the fires die, smoke will rise and shut out the sun. The earth will be enveloped in darkness. There will be no day – only interminable night.

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?

The Head of the Health, Environment and Safety Group of the Bhabha Atomic Research Center in Bombay has a plan. He declared that India could survive nuclear war. His advice is that in the event of nuclear war we take the same safety measures as the ones that scientists have recommended in the event of accidents at nuclear plants.

Take iodine pills, he suggests. And other steps such as remaining indoors, consuming only stored water and food and avoiding milk. Infants should be given powdered milk. 'People in the danger zone should immediately go to the ground floor and if possible to the basement.'

What do you do with these levels of lunacy? What do you do if you're trapped in an asylum and the doctors are all dangerously deranged?

Ignore it, it's just a novelist's naiveté, they'll tell you, Doomsday Prophet hyperbole. It'll never come to that. There will be no war. Nuclear weapons are about peace, not war. 'Deterrence' is the buzz word of the people who like to think of themselves as hawks. (Nice birds, those. Cool. Stylish. Predatory. Pity there won't be many of them around after the war. Extinction is a word we must try to get used to.) Deterrence is an old thesis that has been resurrected and is being recycled with added local flavour. The Theory of Deterrence cornered the credit for having prevented the cold war from turning into a third world war. The only immutable fact about the third world war is that, if there's going to be one,

it will be fought after the Second World War. In other words, there's no fixed schedule.

The Theory of Deterrence has some fundamental flaws. Flaw Number One is that it presumes a complete, sophisticated understanding of the psychology of your enemy. It assumes that what deters you (the fear of annihilation) will deter them. What about those who are not deterred by that? The suicide bomber psyche – the 'We'll take you with us' school – is that an outlandish thought? How did Rajiv Gandhi die?

In any case who's the 'you' and who's the 'enemy'? Both are only governments. Governments change. They wear masks within masks. They molt and re-invent themselves all the time. The one we have at the moment, for instance, does not even have enough seats to last a full term in office, but demands that we trust it to do pirouettes and party tricks with nuclear bombs even as it scrabbles around for a foothold to maintain a simple majority in Parliament.

Flaw Number Two is that deterrence is premised on fear. But fear is premised on knowledge. On an understanding of the true extent and scale of the devastation that nuclear war will wreak. It is not some inherent, mystical attribute of nuclear bombs that they automatically inspire thoughts of peace. On the contrary, it is the endless, tireless, confrontational work of people who have had the courage to openly denounce them, the marches, the demonstrations, the films, the outrage – *that* is what has averted, or perhaps only postponed, nuclear war. Deterrence will not and cannot work given the levels of ignorance and illiteracy that hang over our two countries like dense, impenetrable veils.

India and Pakistan have nuclear bombs now and feel entirely justified in having them. Soon others will too. Israel, Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Norway, Nepal (I'm trying to be eclectic here), Denmark, Germany, Bhutan, Mexico, Lebanon, Sri Lanka, Burma, Bosnia, Singapore, North Korea, Sweden, South Korea, Vietnam, Cuba, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan . . . and why not? Every country in the world has a special case to make. Everybody has borders and beliefs.

And when all our larders are bursting with shiny bombs and our bellies are empty (deterrence is an exorbitant beast), we can trade bombs for food. And when nuclear technology goes on the market, when it gets truly competitive and prices fall, not just governments but anybody who can afford it can have their own private arsenal – businessmen, terrorists, perhaps even the occasional rich writer (like me). Our planet will bristle with beautiful missiles. There will be a new world order. The dictatorship of the pro-nuke elite.

But let us pause to give credit where it's due. Who must we thank for all this? The men who made it happen. The Masters of the Universe. Ladies and gentlemen, the United States of America! Come on up here folks, stand up and take a bow. Thank you for doing this to the world. Thank you for making a difference. Thank you for showing us the way. Thank you for altering the very meaning of life.

From now on it is not dying we must fear, but living.

All I can say to every man, woman and sentient child in India, and over there, just a little way away in Pakistan, is: take it personally. Whoever you are – Hindu, Muslim, urban, agrarian – it doesn't matter. The only good thing about nuclear war is that it is the single most egalitarian idea that man has ever had. On the day of reckoning, you will not be asked to present your credentials. The devastation will be indiscriminate. The bomb isn't in your backyard. It's in your body. And mine. *Nobody*, no nation, no government, no man, no god has the right to put it there. We're radioactive already, and the war hasn't even begun. So stand up and say something. Never mind if it's been said before. Speak up on your own behalf. Take it very personally.

The Bomb and I

In early May (before the bomb), I left home for three weeks. I thought I would return. I had every intention of returning. Of course things haven't worked out quite the way I had planned. While I was away, I met a friend whom I have always loved for, among other things, her ability to combine deep affection with a frankness that borders on savagery. 'I've been thinking about you,' she said, 'about *The God of Small Things* – what's in it, what's over it, under it, around it, above it . . .'

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

Her eyes were on me, bright with a slanting, probing brilliance. She knew that I knew what she was going to say. She was insane. She was going to say that nothing that happened to me in the future could ever match the buzz of this. That the whole of the rest of my life was going to be vaguely unsatisfying. And, therefore, the only perfect ending to the story would be death. My death.

The thought had occurred to me too. Of course it had. The fact that all this, this global dazzle – these lights in my eyes, the applause, the flowers, the photographers, the journalists feigning a deep interest in my life (yet struggling to get a single fact straight), the men in suits fawning over me, the shiny hotel bathrooms with endless towels – none of it was likely to happen again. Would I miss it? Had I grown to need it? Was I a fame-junkie? Would I have withdrawal symptoms?

The more I thought about it, the clearer it became to me that if fame was going to be my permanent condition it would kill me. Club me to death with its good manners and hygiene. I'll admit that I've enjoyed my own five minutes of it immensely, but primarily *because* it was just five minutes. Because I knew (or thought I knew) that I could go home when I was bored and giggle about it. Grow old and irresponsible. Eat mangoes in the moonlight. Maybe write a couple of

failed books – worst sellers – to see what it felt like. For a whole year I’ve cartwheeled across the world, anchored always to thoughts of home and the life I would go back to.

Contrary to all the inquiries and predictions about my impending emigration, that was the well I dipped into. That was my sustenance. My strength. I told my friend there was no such thing as a perfect story. I said that in any case hers was an external view of things, this assumption that the trajectory of a person’s happiness, or let’s say fulfilment, had peaked (and now must trough) because she had accidentally stumbled upon ‘success’. It was premised on the unimaginative belief that wealth and fame were the mandatory stuff of everybody’s dreams.

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

The only dream worth having, I told her, is to dream that you will live while you’re alive and die only when you’re dead. (Prescience? Perhaps.)

‘Which means exactly what?’ (Arched eyebrows, a little annoyed.)

I tried to explain, but didn’t do a very good job of it. Sometimes I need to write to think. So I wrote it down for her on a paper napkin. This is what I wrote:

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

I’ve known her for many years, this friend of mine. She’s an architect too. She looked dubious, somewhat unconvinced by my paper napkin speech. I could tell that structurally, just in terms of the sleek, narrative symmetry of things, and because she loves me, her thrill at my ‘success’ was so keen, so generous, that it weighed in evenly with her (anticipated) horror at the idea of my death. I understood that it was nothing personal . . . Just a design thing.

Anyhow, two weeks after that conversation, I returned to India. To what I think/thought of as home. Something had died but it wasn’t me. It was infinitely more precious. It was a world that has been ailing for a while, and has finally breathed its last. It’s been cremated now. The air is thick with ugliness and there’s the unmistakable stench of fascism on the breeze.

Day after day, in newspaper editorials, on the radio, on TV chat shows, on MTV for heaven’s sake, people whose instincts one thought one could trust – writers, painters, journalists – make the crossing. The chill seeps into my bones as it becomes painfully apparent from the lessons of everyday life that what you read in history books is true. That fascism is indeed as much about people as

about governments. That it begins at home. In drawing rooms. In bedrooms. In beds. ‘Explosion of self-esteem’, ‘Road to Resurgence’, ‘A Moment of Pride’, these were headlines in the papers in the days following the nuclear tests. ‘We have proved that we are not eunuchs any more,’ said Mr Thackeray of the *Shiv Sena* (whoever said we were? True, a good number of us are women, but that, as far as I know, isn’t the same thing.) Reading the papers, it was often hard to tell when people were referring to Viagra (which was competing for second place on the front pages) and when they were talking about the bomb: ‘We have superior strength and potency.’ (This was our Minister for Defence after Pakistan completed its tests.)

‘These are not just nuclear tests, they are nationalism tests,’ we were repeatedly told.

This has been hammered home, over and over again. The bomb is India. India is the 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, the same physics applies.) This is one of the unexpected perks of having a nuclear bomb. Not only can the government use it to threaten the Enemy, they can use it to declare war on their own people. Us. When I told my friends that I was writing this piece, they cautioned me. ‘Go ahead,’ they said, ‘but first make sure you’re not vulnerable. Make sure your papers are in order. Make sure your taxes are paid.’

My papers are in order. My taxes are paid. But how can one not be vulnerable in a climate like this? Everyone is vulnerable. Accidents happen. There’s safety only in acquiescence. As I write, I am filled with foreboding. In this country, I have truly known what it means for a writer to feel loved (and, to some degree, hated too). Last year I was one of the items being paraded in the media’s end-of-the-year National Pride Parade. Among the others, much to my mortification, were a bomb-maker and an international beauty queen. Each time a beaming person stopped me on the street and said ‘You have made India proud’ (referring to the prize I won, not the book I wrote), I felt a little uneasy. It frightened me then and it terrifies me now, because I know how easily that swell, that tide of emotion, can turn against me. Perhaps the time for that has come. I’m going to step out from under the fairy lights and say what’s on my mind.

It’s this:

If protesting against having a nuclear bomb implanted in my brain is anti-Hindu and anti-national, then I secede. I hereby declare myself an independent, mobile republic. I am a citizen of the earth. I own no territory. I have no flag. I’m female, but have nothing against eunuchs. My policies are simple. I’m willing to sign any nuclear non-proliferation treaty or nuclear test ban treaty that’s going. Immigrants are welcome. You can help me design our flag. My world has died. And I write to mourn its passing.

India’s nuclear tests, the manner in which they were conducted, the euphoria with which they have been greeted (by us) is indefensible. To me, it signifies dreadful things. The end of imagination.

On the 15th of August last year we celebrated the 50th anniversary of India's independence. Next May we can mark our first anniversary in nuclear bondage.

Why did they do it? Political expediency is the obvious, cynical answer, except that it only raises another, more basic question: Why should it have been politically expedient? The three Official Reasons given are: China, Pakistan and Exposing Western Hypocrisy.

Taken at face value, and examined individually, they're somewhat baffling. I'm not for a moment suggesting that these are not real issues. Merely that they aren't new. The only new thing on the old horizon is the Indian government. In his appallingly cavalier letter to the US president our prime minister says India's decision to go ahead with the nuclear tests was due to a 'deteriorating security environment'. He goes on to mention the war with China in 1962 and the 'three aggressions we have suffered in the last 50 years [from Pakistan]. And for the last 10 years we have been the victim of unremitting tension and militancy sponsored by it . . . especially in Jammu and Kashmir'.

The war with China is 35 years old. Unless there's some vital state secret that we don't know about, it certainly seemed as though matters have improved slightly between us. The most recent war with Pakistan was fought 27 years ago. Admittedly Kashmir continues to be a deeply troubled region and no doubt Pakistan is gleefully fanning the flames. But surely there must be flames to fan in the first place?

As for the third Official Reason: Exposing Western Hypocrisy – how much more exposed can they be? Which decent human being on earth harbours any illusions about it? These are people whose histories are spongy with the blood of others. Colonialism, apartheid, slavery, ethnic cleansing, germ warfare, chemical weapons, they virtually invented it all. They have plundered nations, snuffed out civilizations, exterminated entire populations. They stand on the world's stage stark naked but entirely unembarrassed, because they know that they have more money, more food, and bigger bombs than anybody else. They know they can wipe us out in the course of an ordinary working day. Personally, I'd say it is arrogance more than hypocrisy.

We have less money, less food, and smaller bombs. However, we have, or had, all kinds of other wealth. Delightful, unquantifiable. What we've done with it is the opposite of what we think we've done. We've pawned it all. We've traded it in. For what? In order to enter into a contract with the very people we claim to despise.

All in all, I think it is fair to say that we're the hypocrites. We're the ones who've abandoned what was arguably a moral position – i.e., *We have the technology, we can make bombs if we want to, but we won't. We don't believe in them.*

We're the ones who have now set up this craven clamouring to be admitted into the club of superpowers. For India to demand the status of a superpower is as ridiculous as demanding to play in the World Cup finals simply because we have a ball. Never mind that we haven't qualified, or that we don't play much soccer and haven't got a team.

We are a nation of nearly a billion people. In development terms we rank number 138 out of the 175 countries listed in the UNDP's Human Development Index (even Ghana and Sri Lanka rank above us). More than 400 million of our people are illiterate and live in absolute poverty, more than 600 million lack even basic sanitation, and more than 200 million have no safe drinking water.

The nuclear bomb and the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya are both part of the same political process. They are hideous byproducts of a nation's search for herself. Of India's efforts to forge a national identity. The poorer the nation, the larger the numbers of illiterate people and the more morally bankrupt her leaders, the cruder and more dangerous the notion of what that identity is or should be.

The jeering, hooting young men who battered down the Babri Masjid are the same ones whose pictures appeared in the papers in the days that followed the nuclear tests. They were on the streets, celebrating India's nuclear bomb and simultaneously 'condemning Western Culture' by emptying crates of Coke and Pepsi into public drains. I'm a little baffled by their logic: Coke is Western Culture, but the nuclear bomb is an old Indian tradition?

Yes, I've heard – the bomb is in the Vedas. It might be, but if you look hard enough you'll find Coke in the Vedas too. That's the great thing about all religious texts. You can find anything you want in them – as long as you know what you're looking for.

But returning to the subject of the non-vedic 1990s: we storm the heart of whiteness, we embrace the most diabolical creation of western science and call it our own. But we protest against their music, their food, their clothes, their cinema and their literature. That's not hypocrisy. That's humour.

It's funny enough to make a skull smile.

We're back on the old ship. The SS Authenticity & Indianness.

If there is going to be a pro-authenticity/anti-national drive, perhaps the government ought to get its history straight and its facts right. If they're going to do it, they may as well do it properly. First of all, the original inhabitants of this land were not Hindu. Ancient though it is, there were human beings on earth before there was Hinduism. India's tribal people have a greater claim to being indigenous to this land than anybody else, and how are they treated by the state and its minions? Oppressed, cheated, robbed of their lands, shunted around like surplus goods. Perhaps a good place to start would be to restore to them the dignity that was once theirs. Perhaps the government could make a public undertaking that more dams of this kind will not be built, that more people will not be displaced.

But of course that would be inconceivable, wouldn't it? Why? Because it's impractical. Because tribal people don't really matter. Their histories, their customs, their deities are dispensable. They must learn to sacrifice these things for the greater good of the Nation (that has snatched from them everything they ever had).

Okay, so that's out.

For the rest, I could compile a practical list of things to ban and buildings to break. It'll need some research, but off the top of my head here are a few suggestions.

They could begin by banning a number of ingredients from our cuisine: chilies (Mexico), tomatoes (Peru), potatoes (Bolivia), coffee (Morocco), tea, white sugar, cinnamon (China) . . . they could then move into recipes. Tea with milk and sugar, for instance (Britain). Smoking will be out of the question. Tobacco came from North America. Cricket, English and Democracy should be forbidden. Either *kabaddi* or *kho-kho* could replace cricket. I don't want to start a riot, so I hesitate to suggest a replacement for English. (Italian? It has found its way to us via a kinder route: marriage, not imperialism.)

All hospitals in which western medicine is practised or prescribed should be shut down. All national newspapers discontinued. The railways dismantled. Airports closed. And what about our newest toy – the mobile phone? Can we live without it, or shall I suggest that they make an exception there? They could put it down in the column marked 'Universal?' (Only essential commodities will be included here. No music, art or literature.)

Needless to say, sending your children to university in the US, and rushing there yourself to have your prostate operated upon will be a cognizable offence.

It will be a long, long list. It would take years of work. I could not use a computer because that wouldn't be very authentic of me, would it?

I don't mean to be facetious, merely to point out that this is surely the shortcut to hell. There's no such thing as an Authentic India or a Real Indian. There is no Divine Committee that has the right to sanction one single, authorized version of what India is or should be.

Railing against the past will not heal us. History has *happened*. It's over and done with. All we can do is to change its course by encouraging what we love instead of destroying what we don't. There is beauty yet in this brutal, damaged world of ours. Hidden, fierce, immense. Beauty that is uniquely ours and beauty that we have received with grace from others, enhanced, re-invented and made our own. We have to seek it out, nurture it, love it. Making bombs will only destroy us. It doesn't *matter* whether we use them or not. They will destroy us either way.

India's nuclear bomb is the final act of betrayal by a ruling class that has failed its people. However many garlands we heap on our scientists, however many medals we pin to their chests, the truth is that it's far easier to make a bomb than to educate 400 million people. According to opinion polls, we're expected to believe that there's a national consensus on the issue. It's official now. Everybody loves the bomb. (Therefore the bomb is good.)

Is it possible for a man who cannot write his own name to understand even the basic, elementary facts about the nature of nuclear weapons? Has anybody told him that nuclear war has nothing at all to do with his received notions of war? Nothing to do with honour, nothing to do with pride. Has anybody bothered to explain to him about thermal blasts, radioactive fallout and the nuclear winter?

Are there even words in his language to describe the concepts of enriched uranium, fissile material and critical mass? Or has his language itself become obsolete? Is he trapped in a time capsule, watching the world pass him by, unable to understand or communicate with it because his language never took into account the horrors that the human race would dream up? Does he not matter at all, this man?

I'm not talking about one man, of course, I'm talking about millions and millions of people who live in this country. This is their land too, you know. They have the right to make an informed decision about its fate and, as far as I can tell, nobody has informed them about anything. The tragedy is that nobody could, even if they wanted to. Truly, literally, there's no language to do it in. This is the real horror of India. The orbits of the powerful and the powerless spinning further and further apart from each other, never intersecting, sharing nothing. Not a language. Not even a country.

Who the hell conducted those opinion polls? Who the hell is the prime minister to decide whose finger will be on the nuclear button that could turn everything we love – our earth, our skies, our mountains, our plains, our rivers, our cities and villages – to ash in an instant? Who the hell is he to reassure us that there will be no accidents? How does he know? Why should we trust him? What has he ever done to make us trust him? What have any of them ever done to make us trust them?

The nuclear bomb is the most anti-democratic, anti-national, anti-human, outright evil thing that man has ever made. If you are religious, then remember that this bomb is Man's challenge to God. It's worded quite simply: *We have the power to destroy everything that You have created.* If you're not religious, then look at it this way. This world of ours is four billion, six hundred million years old.

It could end in an afternoon.