

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

ARUNDHATI ROY: FREEDOM, FASCISM, FICTION AND THE PANDEMIC PORTAL

LAURA FLANDERS: Two years ago this month, the first cases of COVID-19 were reported in the United States. Most of us at the time were busily going about our business completely unaware of the fact that by March 2020, our lives and those of just about everyone on earth would be transformed. Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew, wrote acclaimed author and activist Arundhati Roy just a few weeks into the shutdown. “This pandemic is no different, it is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.” We may not have had a choice about stepping through that portal, Roy observed, but we do have a choice about what to create and fight for on the other side. So now two years on, what have we carried with us through this unanticipated portal and what are we building anew? If our goal is a better society, a world that is kinder, more sustainable, just and free, how are we doing and what do we do now? And what role do writers, literature and language itself play in helping us find our way? Today I'm exploring all this and more with somebody I love to have on this program, Arundhati Roy, one of the world's most beautifully, incisive and moving political writers and novelists, author of "The God of Small Things" and "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness" as well as numerous essays on human rights, environmental justice and global capitalism. This spring, the second edition of her book of essays "Azadi: Fascism, Fiction and Freedom in the Time of the Virus" will be out from Haymarket Books. She's joining us now from her home in New Delhi, India. Arundhati, welcome back to the Laura Flanders Show. We're so glad to have you.

ARUNDHATI ROY: Thank you, Laura. It's so lovely to see you.

LAURA FLANDERS: So I feel as if I anyway, I'm a kind of wannabe believer in the glass half full. In a world that feels like it's teetering on the brink of something really dreadful. So I come to you as somebody who I think often finds herself in a similar position to ask you, where do you think we're at? How are we doing?

ARUNDHATI ROY: If you had asked me this even just a week ago, I think I might have been more pessimistic because like most people I, even though I was not locked down, somehow I was locked out of the life that I usually lead which is to travel to places in India where the language and the conversations are so different from those that are reproduced in the mainstream media, you know? And so last week, I mean, I just came back yesterday in fact, from such a journey after two and a half years. I was traveling and this huge state of Uttar Pradesh where Modi's kitchen of poisonous chemistry is situated, where his constituency, the city of Monarrez now called Varanasi is. And I went there with great trepidation because of what we read and

hear. When I traveled and when I went to villages and when I met people, I realized that the India that all of us have mourned is actually still alive. You know, still full of complexity and somehow stubbornly refusing this narrative of it's all over. You know, the BJP is here forever. Fascists everywhere are ruling. You know, the story was more complex and there was so many beautiful things of people who are being made to quarrel and fight and hate and kill each other, just refusing. But I don't know what's gonna happen, there's an election there next month but still just to see that that was alive was wonderful.

LAURA FLANDERS: I'm so glad you answered in that way, thank you for that. Thank you for traveling. I look forward to doing it too. We just went through January 6th being remembered in this country and I remember that you wrote at that time watching from where you were, you compared your own government to ours by saying where you are, the loonies, the crazies had already taken over the capital. Can you talk a bit more about the political state of things in India that I think people here are so unaware of?

ARUNDHATI ROY: As you know, the Prime Minister Narendra Modi has belonged for most of his adult life since he was a teenager to a proto fascist organization called the RSS which believes that India should be a Hindu nation and that everyone else, all minorities and other religions should live as minorities with fewer rights. So they have of course, their founding ideologues have praised Hitler, have praised Mussolini, have referred to the Muslims of India who number almost 200 million as the Jews of Germany, as equivalent to the Jews of Germany. Modi actually made his political debut on the mainstream stage as the appointed Chief Minister not elected Chief Minister of Gujarat in 2001. And very soon after that was Chief Minister while there was a massacre of Muslims in the streets and villages of Gujarat. Slaughter, rape, pillaging, beating to death, starving to death, burning the bodies to the grave until they could not be identified. But that was the basis on which he became known as Hindu Hriday Samrat, the Emperor of the Hindu hearts. And since then this hatred, these bodies, these false flag attacks, there's been a litany of them that has led him of course, to become the Prime Minister. Just two weeks ago, because there are elections all over India and because the economic status has nosedived unlike in Nazi Germany where Germany was economically revived, here we were just pushed into a crevasse and therefore you're seeing the polarization more. And you saw two meetings of Hindu nationalists in a city called Haridwar and then in Delhi openly calling for the genocide of Muslims, for the killing of Christians. There have been hundreds of attacks on Christian churches over Christmas, statues of Jesus vandalized, churches broken into, people beaten up. And of course, as you know Muslims are regularly lynched on the streets. There's a social boycott of Muslim businesses in many places. Now you have the cool, maybe educated class of Indian Hindu nationalist who is emulating the American old trite and again, openly calling for violence against Dalits, against Muslims, against Christians, against Avivasis. All of this is being allowed to prosper and multiply under the benign gaze of Modi.

LAURA FLANDERS: You talk about one party democracy without accountability. And one of the reasons I'm asking you to repeat, and I'm apologetic so much of what we should know already in this country about what's happening in India, is because I believe it is such an important lesson in what is possible with all the information technology that we have, with all the media that we supposedly have. The conversation about could it happen here continues in this country which is not so different from yours. Large, contested, challenging, powerful.

ARUNDHATI ROY: I read a lot about what's happening there, I follow it closely and I'm always taken aback by how similar it is in some ways. In some ways, different in other ways you know, because this organization that I spoke of, the RSS, it has existed since 1925. It's very organized, it has its own militia, it has hundreds of thousands of branches all over India. And so and yet, in the U.S. as we know the right wing is the side of the argument that owns the weapons and there has been far from reconciliation. This January 6th event has led us to see that America too is on the brink of something dreadful. And you see how, I mean, I see one big difference is that in the U.S., the mainstream media was not entirely behind Trump and therefore became an enemy of Trump. It was with the corporates, of course but not with Trump but in India, the mainstream media, I'd say, 99% of it is completely in support of this project as are the major corporations so far. So, but yes, the dismantling, the systematic dismantling of the institutions of democracy. In India, what you see is a huge sort of jurisprudence, many, many sophisticated laws that have been formulated over so many years, but the truth is that how that law is applied depends on who you are, what religion, what caste, what gender, what class. So there isn't a foundation now, it's all sand, you know? And you see systematically how they are working at dismantling democracy and creating a situation where you have the shell of elections but those elections can only be fought by people who have money. The opposition has been devastated by Modi's sudden demonetization policy.

LAURA FLANDERS: I wish this experience didn't sound so familiar. Let me come to that question that you raised then in your book, even in its title, freedom, a word that has so many meanings. We hear freedom talked about in Kashmir, of course, from people longing to be free. Here, people longing to be free from mask mandates. Women longing to be free from mandatory motherhood. You write that the coronavirus brought us another sort of more terrible understanding of freedom. "The free virus that has made nonsense of international borders, incarcerated whole populations, and brought the modern world to a whole like nothing else ever could." So the freedom you would have us aim for, move towards, lift up, pursue?

ARUNDHATI ROY: Well, I think it's a very, very interesting idea of where does you know, where do people act as a community and stop thinking of freedoms as entirely individual. In a society here where people are crushed because they belong to a particular community, you know? So how do we look at these complexities and how do we basically look at democracies

that mean nothing if they are not based on a constitution that is not based on a set of laws that applies to everybody.

LAURA FLANDERS: You say, “nothing makes this regime happier than when we seal ourselves into silos, into little tanks in which we splash around angrily each for ourselves or our communities, never seeing the big picture. It's only when we breach the banks of our designated tanks that we can turn into a river and flow as an unstoppable current.” Talk more about how do people do that when they are so put against each other?

ARUNDHATI ROY: Well, I just saw that when I went to this village, a little village in a district called Ghazipur in U.P. you know? As I walked into this older, haveli which is the word for a traditional house, I thought there's something about this place which doesn't look like what's happening in the outside world. And then I started to speak to the small group of people that was gathered there and this is in a state as I said where people are calling for the genocide of Muslims, the genocide of Christians, the crushing in some ways of Dalits, they're not calling for that but that is the texture of everyday life. And here, you saw a group of people who were Dalit, who were kinds of other castes, Brahmin and the main politician was a Muslim. And he and his family had been voted to power many times, although the Muslims are the minority there. You know, so it wasn't that you were standing from some Muslim constituency of the Muslim. And you saw the possibility of a kind of conversation where you're talking about justice for everybody because everybody realizes that on their own, they will only get crushed or they will only be used to be heard and then crushed.

LAURA FLANDERS: Do we need new words? Do we need new concepts for our 21st century era? You said, we're leaving the one that we didn't know very well and moving into a new one. Do we need new language?

ARUNDHATI ROY: I think so, I think we do. And I think we need to be able to, I think the main thing is that categories are useful a little. All kinds of categories are useful to understand and structure a way of seeing but we must understand that those categories are not watertight. We mustn't walk and jump into our own boxes and lock them up and put a ribbon around ourselves and say that you know, nobody can come in and nobody can go out because those categories must be osmotic.

LAURA FLANDERS: Yeah, well that brings me back to the pandemic and that portal 'cause I think it's true, I feel it too. Like even when I leave this place and go to do a story that's frightening or shows the obstacles people are up against, there is always that imagination outside of the walls of our media that you just, that doesn't get a chance to penetrate in and when you can feel it in your body makes such a difference to your sense of possibility. That portal, did we remake some things anew or did we simply allow others to drag through that old dead carcasses?

ARUNDHATI ROY: Yeah, I think we're still making our way through it. You know, I don't think we have fully understood what has happened to us. And I think that even when I look at the rage of the American right, of the Indian right, I think that, that rage is also coming from a place where people have felt not looked at, left behind, not thought about. I'm not talking about white supremacy but I'm talking about the people at the bottom who have lost jobs, who are watching the slick corporate world just gather the wealth and suck it out of the rivers and the forests and the banks and sometimes that rage is real but it's misdirected or purposely misdirected by those same people. And then there's the sort of, I think the drug of whatever, Netflix and Amazon Prime and all of us are sitting there looking at each other's reality and forgetting about our own, you know? So I think the whole world has been whipped into a kind of obedience. I know I'm sounding like some crazy right winger in the U.S. but I don't mean it in that way. I just mean that we slowly have to learn to be disobedient again, you know?

LAURA FLANDERS: The role that artists and writers play in that?

ARUNDHATI ROY: Well, I guess that would be crucial in terms of trying to remember that there is a world outside of Facebook and Twitter and Instagram, a world that is slowly falling away, you know? A world that cannot be understood just by gathering comments from everywhere but a world that needs to be listened to very carefully, you know? So how do you communicate, what is the engine that is causing this great inequality? That is using racism? That is using sexism and genderism and casteism? What is that engine that keeps certain people safe whatever the is going on, you know?

LAURA FLANDERS: And what is it?

ARUNDHATI ROY: I'd say that it's corporate capitalism, you know? I would say that. And I would say that unless you look at that too, you know, which is not to say that the answer is maoism or Soviet communism, I'm not saying that but to not understand the cause of the problem, whether it's climate change, whether it's this massive inequality all over the world and the greater the inequality, the greater the unrest. The greater the police tapes that we are faced with, the greater the surveillance. The greater the gathering of information and then you know, why would you not be suspicious when you know the racket of pharmaceutical companies. You know the racket of the Gates Foundation. You know how wealthy they are becoming, you know? It's not to say that science or medicine or the vaccine are terrible but why are they owned like this? When did we last start talking about vaccines in brand names, you know?

LAURA FLANDERS: We could do a whole other program about India and the vaccine and I hope that we can but we need to close. And I have to tell you, we've been living for far too long probably on your promise that another world is not only possible but on a quiet day, you can hear

her breathing. So in a moment where breath seems to have become so important and so critical and in such short supply in many places, how is she doing? Can you still hear her breathing?

ARUNDHATI ROY: Well, it's difficult you know, it's difficult. And the point is that you know, I would be somewhat ridiculous if I was still bright and hopeful and hadn't taken many hits, like all of us have, you know? All I can say is that whether we win or lose, we're gonna keep seeing these things, telling these stories, listening for that other little rhythm of somebody else breathing, you know? It's never going to stop even if you say that there is no hope or there is hope, the point is that some of us are going to do what we're going to do.

LAURA FLANDERS: I wanna thank you Arundhati Roy for being with us yet again and look forward to the next time that we talk. Thank you for the sense of possibility that you continue to bring us and for continuing to walk outside of the walls of your house to bring back news of resistance. There is resistance here as well, I promise, you can see more coverage of it on our show and we'll continue to do this work with you, I hope. Thank you.

ARUNDHATI ROY: Thank you, Laura, what a pleasure it was to talk to you.

LAURA FLANDERS: American exceptionalism, it's the old idea that the United States of America are a place unique and different from everywhere else on earth. And that the dreadful things that happen in other countries can't happen here. Things like colonialism and feudalism and fascism, can't happen here? I listened to Arundhati Roy and I wonder if American exceptionalism is serving us well in this moment. There are lessons to be learned, it seems to me, from what's happening in India, albeit a very different place, but this was one of those interviews that was tremendously hard to cut because at every turn Arundhati was telling us something about India that seemed relevant to this place. She had great things to say about osmotic identities, trans politics, and more. She also talked about the fights in India around citizenship and belonging and who gets to be a part of a democracy in this moment. The good news for you is that the full interview is available for download as a podcast. A podcast that you can listen to as you walk around the earth, as Roy recommends. My promise to you is that we will keep on listening as everybody does in public television. To those barely heard voices on the margins, those whispers that don't merit attention in the money media, that don't perhaps bring in the likes, but could shed a light on where we're going or where we might go next. So you can download and listen. We'll keep listening and looking carefully and we'll see you next time, thanks for joining me. For the Laura Flanders Show, I'm Laura, stay kind, stay curious and thanks.

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