



## Opening the Boundaries of Citizenship

### *Writing Citizenship*

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I am Alessandra Marino and I work in the project Oecumene: Citizenship after Orientalism. My research explores the relation between literature and socio-political activism and I will explain why studying this relation is relevant for talking about citizenship. Nowadays, it is widely accepted that literature can have a political meaning. This statement usually means that novels or poems are more than a form of entertainment: they convey political messages. Much more rarely, though, our attention is directed to how, in a particular context, literature becomes a means to support a struggle for social rights, having the task of informing and mobilizing people.

One famous example of this is the autobiography of Frederick Douglass: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, written in 1845, which became influential in supporting the abolition of slavery. It is not difficult to argue that Douglass' claim for equal rights feeds into a struggle for citizenship ahead of time; and this struggle was fought with different means, literature being one of them. In order to stress the importance of situating creative works in their context, instead of continuing to use the general term 'literature' I prefer using 'acts of writing'. Thinking about acts invites us to reconsider literary figures and their relationships to their times and society.

In this perspective, I studied some Indian writers and their involvement in the struggles for civil rights of indigenous people. Having learnt about indigenous resistance movements from literary texts, I explored: first, why literature often gets disconnected from social sciences; Second, what lessons can Europe learn from the texts and the activism of India's leading authors. Arundhati Roy's visit to London, in June 2011, seemed suggest that British political activists can learn a great deal.

Roy is well known for her Booker Prize winning novel *The God of Small Things*, dealing with gender and caste oppression. Hosted by the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, the debate in which Roy participated highlighted the exploitation of the poor in developing countries carried out by European and American mining or chemical corporations. The heated reactions she received from the audience ranged from defensiveness to guilt and warm support. The talk was connected to the publication of her last book *Broken Republic*, a critique of global forms capitalist domination and injustice. The book powerfully ends saying:

... we have to ask our rulers: Can you leave the water in the rivers, the trees in the forest? Can you leave the bauxite in the mountains? If they say they cannot then perhaps they should stop preaching morality to the victims of their wars (214)

The mention of water is crucial, since Roy's fame as an activist-intellectual derives from her participation in the resistance of villagers and indigenous people to the construction of a megadam in the Narmada valley, in central India.

Roy entered in the debate over the dam in 1998, when a movement called Narmada Bachao Andolan (or NBA) had already mobilized local activism and obtained institutional responses. Her travels across the Valley in 1998 inspired her vibrant descriptions of the struggle in the essay "The Greater Common Good", a living picture of the pain experienced by the people who lost their land and protested against such injustice.

'The Greater Common Good' accused regional and central governments of dispossessing indigenous people in the name of the 'common good' of the nation without having an adequate plan of rehabilitation. Drawing together evidence from surveys, available technical data and experts' opinions, the essay pointed out the ineffectiveness of dam technologies. It also exposed the process of recolonization of rural areas by national and global agents, including the World Bank (for a long time the main funder of the dam industry).

Roy sensed that the struggle had entered a 'newer, sadder phase' (1999, p.12) and she could no longer remain silent. She wrote: 'I felt compelled to set aside Joyce and Nabokov, to postpone reading Don DeLillo's big book and substitute for it reports on drainage and irrigation, with journals and books and documentary films about dams and why they're built and what they do' (1999, p. 9). Having to act, through writing, was an inescapable impulse. She affirmed: 'I felt that the valley needed a writer' and this feeling piqued her own sense of responsibility for the role, the scope and the aim of literature.

'The Greater Common Good' was then published in two widely circulating international magazines and it motivated the readers to join the protesters in the "rally for the valley" due a month after the publication of the essay. The literary domain was not disconnected from the agenda of activism. With a provocative and dialogic style, it directly interpellated a wide audience to listen to the protesters. To those who believed in the national narrative, equating progress to technological development, the author proposed alternative perspectives and urged to take into account her story: "Allow me to shake your faith. Put your hand in mine and let me lead you through the maze... don't look away. It isn't an easy tale to tell" (Roy, p.21). Here the choice of the style is revealing. Roy walks with the readers through the ruins of a 'developing' world and into the valley, anticipating the march she was going to lead during a mass demonstration. In fact, 'The Greater Common Good' begins with the image of the author sitting on top of a hill overlooking the valley and laughing at the undelivered promise of integration and development of indigenous populations set by Indian independence in 1947.

But the image of the valley to be vacated and submerged is physically counteracted by the actual occupation of the site orchestrated during the rally. Hundreds and thousand of people gathered on the banks of the Narmada to show their support for the group, chanting slogans as "nobody will move, the dam will not be constructed".

The story, unfortunately, does not have a happy ending, because after 2001 the dam was constructed and the cost on wildlife and local population was enormous. I have visited the valley and witnessed that hundreds of people are still fighting to receive adequate compensation or full rehabilitation in cultivable and irrigable land. The account of the Narmada struggle is still being written by the people occupying government land in protest actions, or standing in the rising water during the monsoon season.

But not all the efforts were wasted. Roy's 'act of writing' did encourage the movement. Not only "The Grater Common Good" gathered a bigger public for the Rally, but shortly after the publication of her essay, the writer donated the income of her Booker Prize to the NBA. Materially and symbolically, literature supported the struggles of the people of the Narmada. More importantly, it gave them a platform to speak, as equal citizens of India, of the right to obtain land and keep the state to its word.