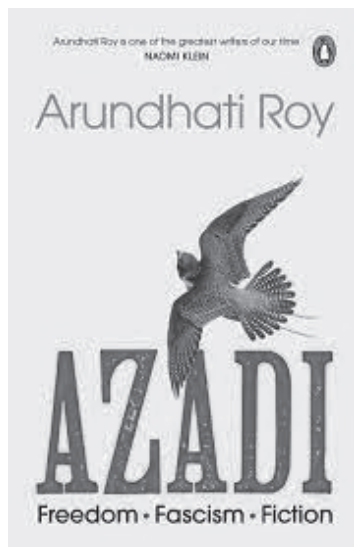


## Book Review

**Bhagvanti**

<b>Title</b>	<b>: <i>Azadi: Freedom • Fascism • Fiction</i></b>
<b>Author</b>	<b>: Arundhati Roy</b>
<b>Publisher</b>	<b>: Penguin Random House India</b>
<b>Year</b>	<b>: 2020</b>
<b>No. of Pages</b>	<b>: 243</b>
<b>Price</b>	<b>: ₹ 499</b>



“May tomorrow be more than just another name for today.”

Arundhati Roy quotes Eduardo Galeano to kick open her latest release, *Azadi* subtitled as *Freedom • Fascism • Fiction*. The quote encapsulates a vision which is coupled with hope while the fear generated by the underlined urgency is not to be ignored. The author sets out to conquer the fear and for that to happen the source from which it emanates has to be expressed first with all the right however controversial details. The task is challenging in the contemporary sorry state of affairs on our planet, where an ‘Argumentative Indian’ like Roy is increasingly gaining the status of an endangered let alone threatened species. The author launches her piercing prose to dissect the coercive politics bubbling below the façade of muscular nationalism which oscillates between feudalism and religious fundamentalism. Situated within the interstices of a threatening reality of increasing violent polarization of polity and the cherished heritage of the ideals envisaged by the constitution, the book offers a keen critique of the macabre that we have created or have come to accept.

The author lays bare a picture of crippling India. We, as a nation, are di-

vided like never before and there is no metric left to evaluate the extent of damage done to the integrity that we dreamt. Roy has really come a long way since her debut with *The God of Small Things*. Her meticulous dissection of grand stealth fascist agenda coupled with skilled whining is illustrative her chiseled craft. She does it again in *Azadi* without diluting the seriousness of the damage, and questions our mute vacuous acceptance of ghoulish politics. What matters to her is 'freedom with responsibility' which to her is 'real unfettered azadi. The highlight of this literary piece is the raw intensity and the unapologetic enumeration of the recent riotous happenings handpicked from the prominent news dailies, dyed with her fierce individual perspective. The compelling interplay of well gripped narrative delineating the debilitating petty politics and the plight of the marginalized and poor makes one weigh the havoc that we have wreaked on our planet and the deprivation of justice to the marginalized that we have come to normalize and accept.

The questions raised in the essays are compelling because what's being unprecedentedly threatened are the ideals of constitution that we dreamt. The imperfectly realized reality is totally antithetical to our cherished vision. The exponentially expanding mob bigotry is scary enough to anticipate any possibility of envisioning a secular republic India. The author attacks the politicians for adroitly parleying the lynching into petty political advantage to rule the roost. She launches a fierce polemic at the bare roots of coercive nationalism for being coy of all the forms of inclusion and for blatantly departing from the notions of secular republic. The manipulation and curtailing of democratic rights are cause of grim concern for Roy and so are they for every thoughtful Indian. She urges the readers to be vigilant, to protect India's democracy and constitutional value come what may.

The book is neatly divided into nine segments the last of which is written at the onset of the pandemic. The very first essay defends the cause of language and sets the tone of the book which is fierce, unapologetic and intriguing all at the same time. She begins by celebrating the language of her pen as the language of privilege and exclusion, as well as the language of emancipation. Roy goes straight to the elucidation of the question posed by Pablo Naruda, In What language Does the Rain Falls on The Tormented Cities, and Translation is Roy's answer to him. She builds this answer to shoot a scathing satire on the exclusion policy of the bigot regimes, who prefer depletion of language, over enrichment, and she compares it to a boggling desire of replacing an ocean with an aquarium. What follows next is a series of thought-provoking questions, caricaturing and Roy reeking sarcasm at her opulent best,

The pages where the writer unleashes the structured working of ideology with its institutionalized cruelty to demonize and ghettoize the minorities may sound exaggerated and hackneyed to some. But Roy succeeds in giving your brain a capsule of her radical critique. From the interference of government in the academia to the ill treatment meted out to the voices of dissent, from the exhilarating speed of unbridled free market fundamentalism to hegemonic religion being made the vehicle of social mobilization and lynching by tv, she doesn't skip anything, nor does she spare anyone.

*Azadi* charts language 's power of breaking away with barriers. It's this very language with which she records her burning gutsy denunciation of the intimidating nationalism-

"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.... not only can the government use it to threaten her Enemy, it can use it to declare war on its own people. Us..."

"Election Season in a Dangerous Democracy" is one of the most defiant essays in the book which reminds you of the recent headlines in your daily newspapers. It's so very bold of Roy to take a dig at the popular arrests, extra judicial executions and assassinations, lynching attacks, false flag attacks and riots which fracture the integrity of India. She accuses the regime of adhering to 'divert and rule' policy. She objects the falsification of history, youth immured in prisons charged with sedition or incitement to violence without any proper trial. Roy's pen is sensitive for the vulnerable who according to her are being cordoned off and silenced, she registers her stance for the vociferous who are being incarcerated. The sad spectacle of living conditions of the marginalized and of poor speaks for itself. The essays hope to aim at creating a social upsurge against the treatment reserved for minorities. Roy's zesty investigations are instigated to expose the perfidy of the politicians who don't leave any stone unturned to sculpt and advance their careers in politics even if it costs the lives and fortunes of the innocent public.

The sick jeopardizing of the constitution and the blatant dismantling of the democracy is horrid, but what is most horrid is its normalization. She attacks the architecture of fascist mob occupied India and lets the readers to explore the divergence between what India could have been and what it has become. The frenzied bigotry fed to masses, the poignant rendition of problems faced by Kashmiris, the imminent annihilation of identities, she records the current empirical reality from her individual perspective which is fierce and powerful. She wants a world where nobody should be

lynched, marginalized, imprisoned or criminalized. Some of the essays have been published previously but they are as pertinent a reading now as they were before. She indeed is at her passionate best when she takes a jibe at the demonetization, the immigrant crisis brought upon by NRC, and the recent calamitous lack of planning to prevent the pandemic.

It might not work for dreamers of heyday but it is not the voice of a doom-sayer but of a realist. The unmasking of constructed quality of culture and identity can be of interest to students of cultural studies. Roy has skillfully created a dichotomy between who knows how to think and who knows how to hate. Falling in hate is the most palpable feelings and Roy has penned it ebulliently. The book is fantastically insightful, refreshingly emotional and absolutely irrepressible all at the same time. Roy's fierce polemic swings from insecurity and fear in one instance to anger and assertiveness in the next. She touches upon the fuzzy edges of dismantled democracy while registering her take on the politically contentious issues. *Azadi* is indeed a masterful foray into the Indian political theatre of our times.

And for this she deserves kudos. Of course, it is fine for people to disagree with Roy, or blaming her for India's disintegration. But the book is unputdownable. However grim or somber it sounds; the reader can relate to each of the events mentioned. Some of the readers might find the essays replete with blind bias or accuse them of being written with intention to malign her targets, but to those who concur with her ideology it's the bold truth that needs to be stated and heard.

Depending on one's mental make-up, one may choose to broaden his/her horizons or continue to hate. The book is meant for those who dare to accept the severity of reality and want to take a vow to accept their role in bringing the change while the rest can continue to be mired in their respective ideologies. Wafting across the cataclysmic waves of coercive nationalism the real India is getting zoned off to sleep in inertia, it has to awake widely before it reaches a point where it won't have any skin left in the game. For the book at its core is directed at nothing but-

"Reimagining India

Only that!"