



DAM/AGE

A Film with Arundhati Roy

BY ARADHANA SETH

COLOR, 50 MINUTES, 2002, CLOSED-CAPTIONED

FIRST RUN/ICARUS FILMS

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BROOKLYN, NY 11201

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Arundhati Roy. Image source: The 2005, 3rd San Francisco International South Asian Film Festival. <http://www.thirdi.org/festival/2003/branding/damage02.JPG>

This documentary, accessible to students from upper-level high school to college, is direct and compelling, and layered in such a way that it poses questions that linger long after the credits roll. Its primary focus is Arundhati Roy, the graciously articulate author from southern India whose principled and daring stands on behalf of social justice have provoked admiration and outrage on the Indian national scene. Roy first broke onto the international scene with her stirring English language novel, *The God of Small Things*. Among the most disarming and unexpected elements of *Dam/Age* are her personal reflections on what it means to be a writer. For her, writing is no mercenary toil. It requires an active social conscience, a desire to simplify issues by clearing away the lies, the propaganda, and the nonsense promoted by the privileged elite. She seeks to “tell it like it is,” with no histrionics or hype.

In her talks, essays, and books, Roy seeks to shine light into corners the government prefers to keep dark. Decrying the policy of accepting “local pain for national gain,” Roy asks, “What counts as acceptable collateral damage?” She responds by saying that the pain and suffering of the poor and underprivileged are always acceptable to those in power. She also asks embarrassing questions in the context of an earlier cause she spearheaded in Indian politics, the issue of India’s 1998 explosion of a nuclear device at Pokran. She was then even more isolated as a voice against nuclear proliferation in a country intoxicated by a surge in nationalism brought on by a border war with Pakistan, a war in which leaders of both countries publicly threatened to “nuke” each other’s nations.

Roy’s appeal to quiet common sense and reason reflect a new kind of “radical,” one who is sensitive, well spoken, and committed

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But writing is not the subject of what turns out to be a very real action drama. Resistance to those who would exploit the poor and the underprivileged is at the heart of this story as we watch Roy struggle against the Indian Supreme Court’s sometimes comical, but nonetheless brutal, efforts to quiet her embarrassing criticisms by sending her to prison. Specifically, she leads and joins major protests against the displacement of twenty-five million Adivasis (indigenous peoples) who will lose their homes and their lands as a result of the construction of the Narmada Dam. Relentlessly and consistently, Roy pushes the Indian Government by reminding it of inconvenient facts: over the years of dam building in India, fifty-six million people have been evicted, often violently, from their farmlands, forced to watch those lands and their homes on them sink under rising waters. Then they’ve been abandoned to wander as destitute beggars in the cities of India. This, says the government, is simply bringing them into the modern age. The vaunted benefits of such grand projects, says Roy, never materialized. The promised irrigation didn’t happen, but even if it had, the cost would be too great.

to the welfare of human beings. Given this, it becomes even more compelling when she makes a further case that these social issues be not confined to India or South Asia. She decries the complicity of the World Bank and of several multinational corporations in the construction of the several dams in the Narmada Valley that are destroying the lives of millions. She suggests somewhat ominously that this pattern is not unique to India.

Clearly, this is a film with a cause, with a point of view. But it doesn’t bludgeon us. It simply asks inconvenient questions, and, as Roy seeks to do in her writings, it makes an effort to tell stories and to reveal truths that we are not likely to find elsewhere. Classes in politics, social science, writing, women’s studies, and rural and agricultural development will find this film a powerful tool for opening issues that textbook writers might prefer to obscure. ■

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