

“I am neither a guide nor a pacifist: I am a resistant who wants to point out my country’s enemies for others to see.” In this exclusive interview with east, Arundhati Roy, India’s most important writer, re-

# Roy: too many false myths about my India

CULTURE

by Francesca Lancini

jects the clichés used to describe her, explains that the world today is more complex than it was in Gandhi’s time and comments on current events in Burma

**A**rundhati Roy, who became famous all over the world in 1997 with her novel *The God of Small Things*, has subsequently written political essays and taken part in campaigns for the rights of the downtrodden, including thousands of Indian peasants displaced by the building of dams. In her many articles and speeches, this tiny woman, who looks magnificent at 46, has severely criticised all the oligarchies that hold power and cause wars. “I cannot justify war”, she says, her eyes ablaze with energy and determination, “because it is always caused by governments, but I can understand some wars. Peace without justice can actually favour the interests of multinationals and governments”. What about Mahatma Gandhi’s teachings on non-violence? “The Mahatma wasn’t a god, although some of his ideas could change the world for the better. Today, however, the State has destroyed, mocked and belittled the major non-violent movements”. Roy thinks that pacifism has been defeated, but that we have to keep resisting – in her case, by writing a second novel nearly ten years after the success of her epic family saga, which painted a portrait of India as a complex nation bearing little resemblance to the stereotyped views of the country.

## **Does *ahimsa*, or non-violent resistance, still make sense after the repression of the demonstrations in Burma?**

The State has destroyed, mocked and belittled the major non-violent movements not only in Burma but also in India, supposedly the homeland of *ahimsa*. We are seeing armed conflicts emerging everywhere. The oppressive colonial power in Burma, Palestine, Kashmir or Iraq does not take non-violence seriously. Non-violence can actually be yet another way for governments, which are all armed to the teeth today, to take advantage of people. You can’t only distinguish between the violent and the non-violent in a war. The difference is sometimes artificial.

## **Why is that?**

All the people in a conflict are not necessarily armed and fighting a war. In India, for example, there are small armed groups and non-violent militants fighting for the same cause. The world is more complex today than it was when Gandhi was waging his non-violent fight for independence (1931-47, *editor’s note*).

## **Speaking of the Mahatma, what remains of his teachings today?**

Gandhi is a huge and complicated subject.



He was not a god and there are many things about him that I do not agree with, such as his paternalist attitude towards the caste system. But some of his ideas are still fundamental to imagine a world that is different from the way it is today, afflicted by unchecked consumerism, economic colonialism and global warming. But I don't know how we can apply his moral principles. They have to be absorbed at the personal level, since politics is incapable of doing so.

**Even in your country, a reference point for many pacifists?**

Pacifist India, where people levitate off the ground and spend their time meditating, is a false myth that appeals to tourists. Today, mine is a country with violent politics where people fighting for peace have been cast aside.

**Like members of the neo-global movement, for which many people consider you to be a guide. How do you see yourself?**

I am neither a guide nor a pacifist, if you mean someone who will settle for peace at any price, even without justice. In a feudal country like India, if you do that you end up favouring the interests of multinationals and the ruling power. I oppose this: I am for resistance.

**So do you think there are just wars?**

No. I cannot justify war, because it is always started by governments. In central India the government gives indigenous people weapons to fight the Maoists and tells them: "You're either with us or you're against us". In this case the civil war is caused by the government, which pits the poor against the poor. People like me are expected to condemn these guerrilla wars, but I can't. There's no choice in their situation and one cannot be a pacifist.

**But you have always supported the use of non-violent means. How is your pacifist fight against dams, which the Indian government views as symbols of great progress, going, particularly the fight against the Narmada Dam project?**

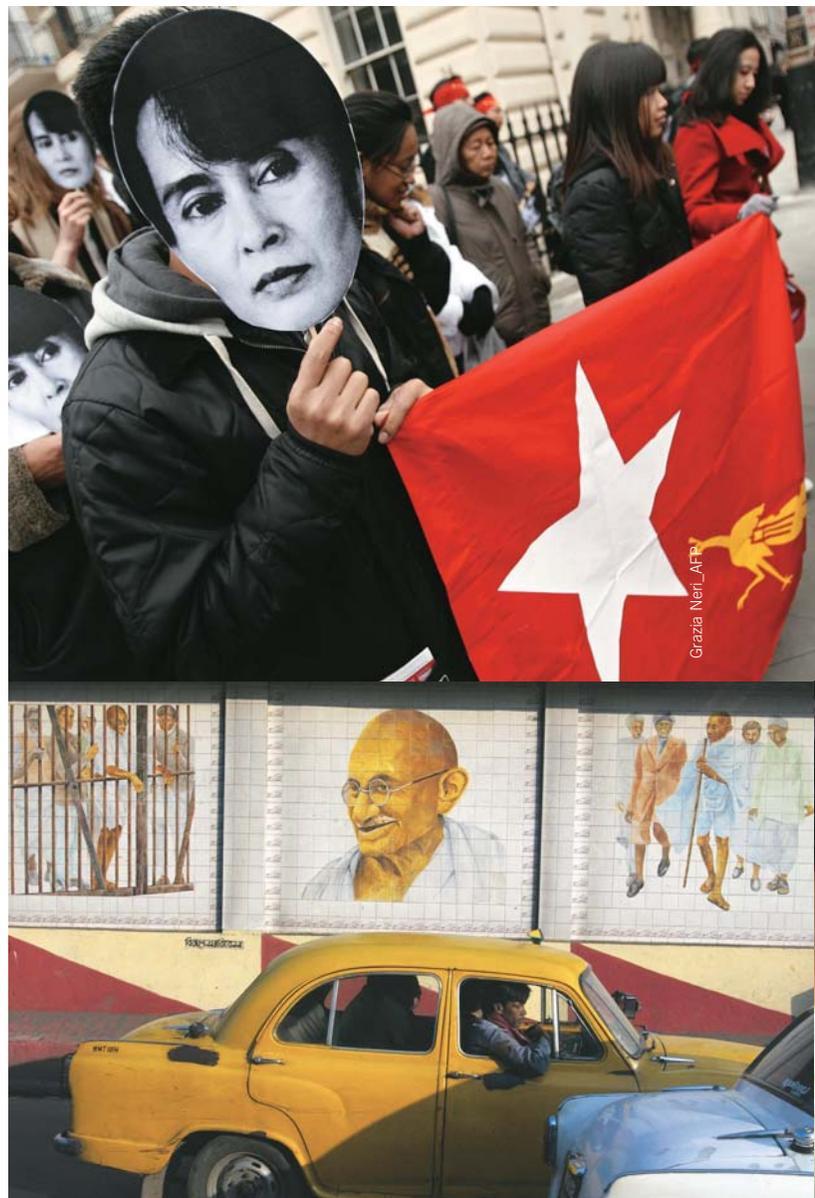
It is not my fight: it's the fight of thousands

According to Roy, Gandhi's moral principles should be absorbed on an individual level, as politics is unable to do it. In India, as well as in Myanmar, big non-violent movements were destroyed by the State

of people who live on the banks of the river. The fight is going badly, not only on the Narmada, but also all over India. Many dams have now been built and are partially operational. The World Bank is financing them once again with the accord of the Indian government and the Indian Supreme Court has approved their construction, to the detriment of the ecosystem. They have even tried to change the course of all the rivers and link them to each other. It's a crazy idea.

**A large part of the country will be flooded and thousands of people displaced.**

Yes, because there's a social split underway in India. The middle class is increasingly losing



interest in the rest of the population. The World Bank's involvement notwithstanding, India is its own victim, not a victim of the international community.

**Your first novel also emphasised that India is going through an incredible economic boom, to the detriment of "small things and small lives". What is your idea of progress?**

Progress means that society tries to become more egalitarian. Some people in India are becoming incredibly rich while the majority of the population is becoming incredibly poor. Many people have less food than people in Sub-Saharan Africa. In recent years 137,000 peasants have committed

suicide because of their debts. One million sweepers are forced to carry human shit on their heads. Muslims are seriously discriminated against and in Kashmir, the most militarized zone in the world, 60,000 people have been killed in less than twenty years. But the newspapers don't talk about all these problems because they only see India as a market to invest in.

**Given the scenario, how do you find the strength to keep resisting?**

You fight when you have to protect something you love. India is perhaps the country with the greatest imagination. It's a joyous anarchy, not a rigid social structure: a positive chaos that the authorities want to wipe out for their economic interests. There is no need for GAP to sell saris. Indians can keep making them on their own.

**Will your next commitment also be on the social front?**

No, it's time for me to write a second novel. Since I published *The God of Small Things* in 1997, India has begun a journey into darkness. Since then I have devoted myself to political essays and social campaigns because the enemy had to be pointed out. Now that I have reached this objective it's time to fight the battle, but that is not my job. I have to go back to my work as a writer.

About Arundhati Roy

India's best-known contemporary writer was born in 1961 to a Christian social activist mother and a Hindu landowner father. She won the prestigious Booker Prize in 1997 with her debut novel *The God of Small Things*. The book is semi-autobiographical and was inspired by her childhood experiences in Ayemenem in the Indian State of Kerala. It has been translated and published in 21 countries and featured on the "New York Times" list of Notable Books for 1997. Since then, Roy has written essays and articles on political and social issues such as the project to build dams on the Narmada river, India's nuclear programme, Hindu religious fanaticism and the multinational company Enron's activities in India. Three of her essays have been published in Italy: *The Checkbook and the Cruise Missile: Conversations with David Barsamian, An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire and War Talk*. Arundhati Roy lives in New Delhi. Many of her articles have been published in the Italian weekly magazine "Internazionale".

\_Below: young Indians protesting against the building of a dam on the Narmada river, a symbol of great progress for the Indian government

