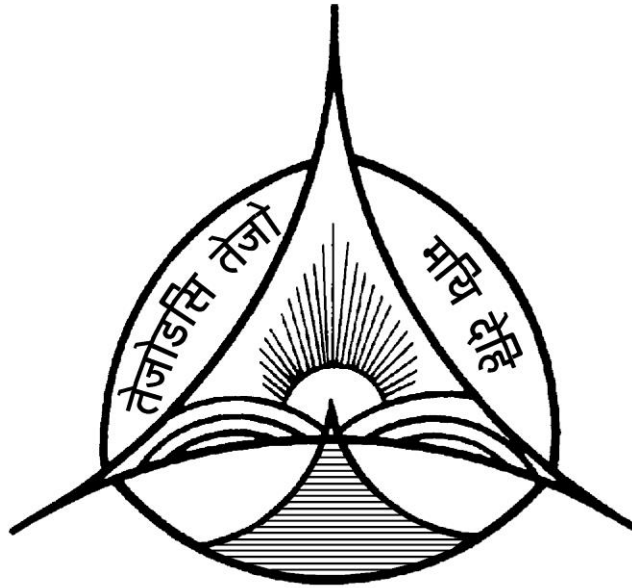


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Things That Can Be Said And Cannot Be Said: Essays and Conversations by Arundhati Roy and John Cusack, New Delhi: Juggernaut Books, 2017

“Do I Dare Disturb the Universe?”

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Were the owl of Minerva to spread its wings before the falling of dusk and contravene a Hegelian reconciliatory wisdom (that comes but prospectively), then perhaps antiphons could disturb silences and a dissonance unsettle the times we live in. *Things That Can and Cannot Be Said* is an ambitious attempt at exhuming contentions long interred in varying degrees of inarticulacy by failures of the imagination. The semantics that cohere the German *Shweigen* (be silent) mark a silence that enables a civilised reticence around what must not be said, and this collection extends the promise of renegotiating the unsaid and its closures. The essays and conversations that Arundhati Roy and John Cusack bring to this compilation with Edward Snowden and Dan Ellsberg are scoured from the ‘gook perspective’—because it still feels like war where we are.

It is the winter of 2014, the news is the usual, ‘horror in the Middle East, Russia, America face off in Ukraine’, making the present's despairing unchangeability a good time for a concurrent irascibility to convene. The ironies replete in convening the 'Moscow Un-Summit' against the backdrop of the Red Square and Kremlin are not lost on the summiteers, ‘Going through immigration of the country he once planned to annihilate, Dan flashed the peace sign’. Moscow’s Ritz-Carlton, now belatedly partaking a piece of the capitalist pie, mirrors also its jarring flashy opulence. Free market’s stock characters, millionaires cavorting on new money and high stepping young women are contraposed against quiet liveried waiters. Interestingly, an earlier time spent in Stockholm to meet with Ellsberg at the ‘Right Livelihood Awards’ is described as ‘a classic human rights evening...gourmet food and good intentions, a choir singing beautiful noels’. Coevally when the Kremlin’s lights wink at a kindred sharing of big brother surveillance, now effortlessly transported to the West, a complicated obverse underscores the cloying correctness of the ‘classic’ Stockholm evening against the crassness of the Russian hotel experience. The depressing East-West mirror imaging, with redemption for neither, and the Red Square’s hauntings by ghosts of its communist past, find a critical referencing in Roy’s, ‘I have plenty of Marxism in me’, as does her other brief carrying an exigent understanding of communist failures, ‘Russia and China...had the same idea about generating wealth—tear it out of the bowels of the earth. And now they have the same idea in the end...capitalism’. The doctrinal impoverishment of the Left has also flattened in its wake, as she says, all ideological

battles into ‘lifestyle wars’. Wars deradicalised and now fought only to preserve and enhance the ‘delicate pleasures and exquisite comforts’ of a chosen few under the paranoid gibberish misnomer, ‘The War on Terror’.

Countries and nation states receive extensive attention in the conversations, after all in Ellsberg and Snowden are two former ‘patriots’ gone rogue and in Cusack and Roy, two gloomy naysayers of nationalism. ‘Isn’t the greatness of great nations directly proportionate to their ability to be ruthlessly genocidal? Doesn’t the height of a country’s “success” usually also mark the depths of its moral failure?’ These disquisitions from Roy mark once again her fraught Socratic love for country, implicated within adversative dissent and critical questioning. While unblinkered in her criticism of the India that ‘invented the caste system and [one that] celebrates the genocide of Muslims and Sikhs and the lynching of Dalits’, she is also quick to acknowledge it as, ‘the land of poetry and mad rebellion...that produces haunting music and exquisite textiles’. This is of course vintage Roy, marked by the unflinching continuities of her dissensual political critique of nation states, borders and their programmed violence, contra her avowed imbrication in affective communities. Strikingly, this is recorded against the background of a weeping Ellsberg, whose emotional distress erupts from a felt loss and estrangement from the ‘idea’ that was America. Roy’s own countermanding and severance from ideas of belonging, stripped of sentimentality and devoid of nostalgia, are yet in their non-linearities, intricately entangled and connected with geographies of land and river; ‘I could weep for a river valley, and I have. But for a country? Oh man, I don’t know?’

Despite the differing personal trajectories of the quartet—Cusack and Roy separated by artist-writer histories from the two former President’s men turned whistleblowers, Snowden and Ellsberg—their political congruities align in a puissant coming together. Even as this meeting sequesters the four into a heterotopic echo chamber, it needs no tailed apologia or justificatory caveat. To have a plenary that only represents a combative politics is licit in times when the Right has already, through its marauding numbers, appropriated and annexed mainstream spaces and raised the bar for bigotry. At such a catachrestic juncture to then selectively raise the need for accommodating the conservative, obscurantist voice for the sake of debate and representation, is an anachronistic excess best dismissed.

If the suggestion of a White Boys Club deigning Roy an entry looms as a shadowy charge, then it is dispelled quite early in the reading. Roy’s own responses deprivilege all apprehensions of this hallowed access, and her own vantages as a veteran in a fight she has long fought are unequivocally established. Even the arcane, coded language of data access and document leaking that the whistleblowers, Snowden and Ellsberg, colloquialise enthusiastically is no deterrent, and her reviewing of their conversation weighs in through a detached indulgence. Roy’s vanguardism

within this chosen confederacy is also emphatically certified in Snowden's very first greeting, 'I know why you're here.... To radicalize me'. Further, her remark, 'I embraced Cusack as a true comrade only after I opened his freezer and found nothing but an old brass bus horn and a pair of small antlers', is ordered from her own asserted stipulative conditions of acceptance of the comradeship on offer.

This allusion to the brass bus horn and antlers is, in fact, quite baffling, and one that subtly proscribes the uncomprehending reader. The reader's outsider status is thereafter negotiated through limited privileged access into what seems to be an exclusive club. This sense is sharpened when some of the backroom banter gets selectively transcribed. The first conversation between Cusack and Roy, outside of the recorded Q&A, offers a glimpse into their easy camaraderie: 'Wanna go to Moscow and meet Dan Ellsberg and Ed Snowden? Don't talk rubbish. Listen if I can pull it off should we go? ... Yaa Maan. Let's go'. Then there are occasional asides allowing glimpses into Roy's own self-conscious tentativeness, 'When I asked her if I could use some of the transcripts, she said, Okay but make sure you edit out the idiocy. At least mine'. Even the few photographs included of the four in conversation are low-quality exposures, mostly through rough 'non-posed' angles, as if this informalised sharing between a closed circle releases them from demands of the perfect shot and take. And yet the injunction of limited access is there through reminders of all that continues to remain restrictively off limits. 'The upshot is that we didn't get the cautious, diplomatic, regulation Edward Snowden. The downshot ... is that the jokes, the humour and repartee that took place in Room 1001 cannot be reproduced'. That a freewheeling, incautious, non-regulation Snowden had said things that do not find their way here is a disappointment that the reader is left to deal with. In this ellipsis is a grave short changing, if not a betrayal of the titular promise that the book carries. Were that not enough, there is also a reference to a meeting with Julian Assange that finds tantalising mention but which then is left out entirely: 'On the day we met Julian, we were not allowed by security to take phones, cameras, or any recording devices into the room. So that conversation also remains off the record'. This expunging of the conversation with Assange is surprising at many levels. Not only would *Things That Can and Cannot Be Said* have acquired invaluable traction with the inclusion of Assange's experiences of hacking and surveillance, it would, in its defiant inclusion, have kept 'things that cannot be said' from being relinquished into silences that it had determined a tending of. Further, if the meeting with Assange was never meant to be relayed, then it is mystifying why it finds gratuitous mention in the first place.

What this book does offer is some truths, many that are uncomfortable within a larger liberal discourse, and others within a Rightist conservatism. Issues like the Saudi Arabia–America nexus that makes them turn a blind eye to each other's excesses, be it against human rights or Muslim witch hunting, or the fact that 'nuclear bombs are the logical corollary to the idea of the

nation state' are varyingly leavened into conversation along with other nuancings that Roy brings to understandings like the inevitabilities of violence as backlash, or ideas about the compromising of resistance movements— 'They're in the business of creating what we in India call *Paaltu Sher* ...like a pretend resistance ... so you can let off steam without damaging anything'. These and other such instances are marked as 'bygones' to be buried in liberal silences. 'In India we can talk about Palestine, but we cannot talk about Kashmir', and 'You can say, for example, that it's wrong to behead people physically, like with a knife, which implies that it's alright to blow their heads off with a drone...isn't it?' Through Snowden and Ellsberg, the new spectres of surveillance and state control are brought into existing debates on democracy and nation states, American hegemony and free market politics—all old familiar markings from Roy's oeuvre. But what this pithy little book in less than 120 pages is striving for is thwarted by a lack of both rigour and concomitant length. It is in its breadth a 101 class on issues that need highlighting, but in its many lags it wants an expanded narrative capacity. Just the coming together of the two, Snowden and Roy, should have yielded not mere transcripts of their exchanges, but a more critical expansiveness and engagement with the provocations that the book sets out to explore. But this is in effect what it stops short of. The binarism that precludes what can be said from what cannot be, dissolves in a soggy, squelching pool of things half said.

What is relayed finally is an aligning within a rhetorical exercise. Here I turn to Stanley Fish's favouring of the dialectical presentation, as against the rhetorical, that aims at challenging and transforming an entire assemblage of faith and convictions held by the reader. The difference in the dialectical is not just in terms of capacity and scope, but also in the methods employed, 'didactic in a special sense; it does not preach the truth but asks that its readers discover the truth for themselves'. A disavowal of easy linearities is necessary for the eventual transformation of the reader, but here a delimiting of its own possibilities within the rhetorical belies the promise that underwrites this collection. The title, though gesturing loftily at the ineffable, the apophatic, cedes its contingency and space to reflect on the frictions of language against the unsayable, forsaking in this the possibility of creating a powerful counter discourse. In what does get said, there is still far too much left unplumbed and the framing of a desideratum in Judith Butler's words, 'To hear beyond what we are able to hear' remains yet deferred. The *raison d'être* of the book then finally seems to rest on an expediency that assumes an indulgent acceptance from the reader. 'The Un-Summit cannot be written about in the detail that it deserves. Yet it definitely cannot not be written about. Because it did happen'.