

Introduction

While we were discussing the title of this book, my publisher in the United Kingdom, Simon Prosser, asked me what I thought of when I thought of Azadi. I surprised myself by answering, without a moment's hesitation, 'A novel.' Because a novel gives a writer the freedom to be as complicated as she wants – to move through worlds, languages, and time, through societies, communities, and politics. A novel can be endlessly complicated, layered, but that is not the same as being loose, baggy, or random. A novel, to me, is freedom with responsibility. Real, unfettered Azadi – freedom. Some of the essays in this volume have been written through the eyes of a novelist and the universe of her novels. Some of them are about how fiction joins the world and becomes the world. All were written between 2018 and 2020, two years that in India have felt like two hundred. In this time, as the Covid-19 pandemic burns through us, our world is passing through a portal. We have journeyed to a place from which it looks unlikely that we can return, at least not without some kind of

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serious rupture from the past – social, political, economic and ideological. The last essay in this collection is about that. Coronavirus has brought with it another, more terrible understanding of Azadi: the Free Virus that has made nonsense of international borders, incarcerated whole populations and brought the modern world to a halt like nothing else ever could. It casts a different light on the lives we have lived so far. It forces us to question the values we have built modern societies on – what we have chosen to worship and what to cast aside. As we pass through this portal into another kind of world, we will have to ask ourselves what we want to take with us and what we will leave behind. We may not always have a choice – but not thinking about it will not be an option. And in order to think about it, we need an even deeper understanding of the world gone by, of the devastation we have caused to our planet and the deep injustice between fellow human beings that we have come to accept. Hopefully, these essays, all but one written before the pandemic came upon us, will go some small way towards helping us negotiate the rupture. If nothing else, they are a moment in history recorded while waiting on a metaphorical runway before the aircraft we're all in took off for an as yet unknown destination. A matter of academic interest for future historians.

The first essay is the W. G. Sebald Lecture on Literary Translation, which I delivered at the British Library

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in London in June 2018. Much of it is about how the messy partitioning of the language we knew as Hindustani into two separate languages with two separate scripts – now sadly and somewhat arbitrarily called Hindi and Urdu (in which, erroneously, Hindi is associated with Hindus and Urdu with Muslims) – presaged the current project of Hindu nationalism by more than a century.

Many of us hoped that 2018 would be the last year of the reign of Narendra Modi and his Hindu nationalist party. The early essays in this collection reflect that hope. As the 2019 general election approached, polls showed Modi and his party's popularity dropping dramatically. We knew this was a dangerous moment. Many of us anticipated a false-flag attack or even a war that would be sure to change the mood of the country. One of the essays – 'Election Season in a Dangerous Democracy' (3 September 2018) – is, among other things, about this fear. We held our collective breath. In February 2019, weeks before the general election, the attack came. A suicide bomber blew himself up in Kashmir, killing forty security personnel. False flag or not, the timing was perfect. Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party swept back to power.

And now, only a year into the BJP's second term, through a series of moves that this book deals with, India has changed beyond recognition. The secular, inclusive republic envisaged in the Constitution – imperfectly

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realized, but one that many of us dreamt of (and haven't entirely given up on, as this book makes obvious) – is being threatened at its very foundations. The infrastructure of fascism is staring us in the face, the pandemic is speeding up that process in unimaginable ways, and yet we hesitate to call it by its name.

I started to write this introduction while the US president, Donald Trump, and his family were on an official visit to India in the last week of February 2020. So it too has had to pass through the rupture, the pandemic portal. The first case of Covid-19 in India had been reported on 30 January. Nobody, least of all the government, paid any attention. It had been more than 200 days since the state of Jammu and Kashmir had been stripped of its special status and placed under an information siege, and more than two months since a new anti-Muslim citizenship law, widely seen as being unconstitutional, had brought millions of protesters onto the streets of India. In a public speech to a crowd wearing Modi and Trump masks, Donald Trump informed Indians that they play cricket, celebrate Diwali, and make Bollywood films. We were grateful to learn that about ourselves. Between the lines he sold us MH-60 helicopters worth \$3 billion. Rarely has India publicly humiliated herself thus.

Not far from the Grand Presidential Suite of the Delhi hotel where Trump spent the night, and Hyderabad House where he held trade talks with Modi,

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Delhi was burning. In the north-east of the city Muslims from working-class neighbourhoods were under attack. Violence had been in the air for a while, with politicians delivering open threats to Muslim women conducting peaceful sit-in protests against the new citizenship law. When the attack began, Muslims fought back. Houses, shops, vehicles were burned. Many, including a policeman, were killed. Many more were hospitalized with gunshot wounds. Horrifying videos flew around the internet. In one of them, grievously wounded young Muslim men, laid out on the street, some piled against each other by uniformed policemen, are being forced to sing the National Anthem. (Subsequently one of them, Faizan, died. The *Huffington Post* carried a chilling report of how he had been tortured and had a policeman's baton pushed down his throat.)

Trump made no comment on the horror swirling around him. Instead he conferred on Narendra Modi the title 'Father of the Nation'. Until recently, this was Gandhi's title. I am no fan of Gandhi, but surely, even he did not deserve this.

After Trump left, the violence went on for days. More than fifty people lost their lives. About 300 were admitted into hospital with terrible wounds. Thousands of people moved into refugee camps. In Parliament, the home minister praised himself and the police. Other politicians made speeches cheered by their smirking supporters in which they more or less blamed Muslims

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for provoking the violence, for attacking themselves, burning their own shops and homes, and throwing their own bodies into the open sewage canals that criss-cross their neighbourhood. Every effort was made by the mainstream media to portray the violence as a Hindu–Muslim ‘riot’. I wouldn’t call it a riot. I’d say it was an attempted pogrom against Muslims led by an armed, fascist mob.

And while the dead bodies were still surfacing in the filth, Indian government officials held their first meeting about the virus. When Modi announced the nationwide lockdown on 24 March, India spilled out her terrible secrets for all the world to see.

What lies ahead?

Reimagining the world. Only that.

In What Language Does Rain Fall Over Tormented Cities?

The Weather Underground in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness**

At a book reading in Kolkata, about a week after my first novel, *The God of Small Things*, was published, a member of the audience stood up and asked, in a tone that was distinctly hostile: ‘Has any writer ever written a masterpiece in an alien language? In a language other than his mother tongue?’

I hadn’t claimed to have written a masterpiece (nor to be a ‘he’), but nevertheless I understood his anger towards me, a writer who lived in India, wrote in English, and who had attracted an absurd amount of attention. My answer to his question made him even angrier. ‘Nabokov,’ I said. And he stormed out of the hall.

The correct answer to that question today would, of

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course, be ‘algorithms’. Artificial Intelligence, we are told, can write masterpieces in any language and translate them into masterpieces in other languages. As the era that we know, and think we vaguely understand, comes to a close, perhaps we, even the most privileged among us, are just a group of redundant humans gathered here with an arcane interest in language generated by fellow redundants.

Only a few weeks after the mother tongue/masterpiece incident, I was on a live radio show in London. The other guest was an English historian who, in reply to a question from the interviewer, composed a paean to British imperialism. ‘Even you,’ he said, turning to me imperiously, ‘the very fact that you write in English is a tribute to the British Empire.’

Not being used to radio shows at the time, I stayed quiet for a while, as a well-behaved, recently civilized savage should. But then I sort of lost it, and said some extremely hurtful things. The historian was upset, and after the show told me that he had meant what he said as a compliment, because he loved my book. I asked him if he also felt that jazz, the blues, and all African American writing and poetry were actually a tribute to slavery. And whether all of Latin American literature was a tribute to Spanish and Portuguese colonialism.

Notwithstanding my anger, on both occasions my responses were defensive reactions, not adequate answers. Because those incidents touched on a range of

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incendiary questions – regarding colonialism, nationalism, authenticity, elitism, nativism, caste, and cultural identity – all jarring pressure points on the nervous system of any writer worth her salt. However, to reify language in the way both of these men had renders language speechless. When that happens, as it usually does in debates like these, what has actually been written ceases to matter. That was what I found so hard to countenance. And yet I know – I knew – that language is that most private and yet most public of things. The challenges thrown at me were fair and square. And obviously, since I'm still talking about them, I'm still thinking about them.

The night of that reading in Kolkata, city of my estranged father and of Kali, Mother Goddess, with the long red tongue and many arms, I fell to wondering what my mother tongue actually was. What was – is – the politically correct, culturally apposite, and morally appropriate language in which I ought to think and write? It occurred to me that my mother was actually an alien, with fewer arms than Kali perhaps but many more tongues. English is certainly one of them. My English has been widened and deepened by the rhythms and cadences of my alien mother's other tongues. I say 'alien' because there's not much that is organic about her. Her nation-shaped body was first violently assimilated and then violently dismembered by an imperial British quill. I also say 'alien' because the violence

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unleashed in her name on those who do not wish to belong to her (Kashmiris, for example), as well as on those who do (such as Indian Muslims and Dalits), makes her an extremely unmotherly mother.

How many tongues does she have? Officially, approximately 780, only twenty-two of which are formally recognized by the Indian Constitution, while another thirty-eight are waiting to be accorded that status. Each has its own history of colonizing or being colonized. There are few pure victims or pure perpetrators. There is no national language. Not yet. Hindi and English are designated 'official languages'. According to the Constitution of India (which, we must note, was written in English), the use of English by the state for official purposes was supposed to have ceased by 26 January 1965, fifteen years after the document came into effect. Hindi, written in the Devanagari script, was to take its place.¹ However, any serious move towards making Hindi the national language has been met with riots in non-Hindi-speaking regions of the country. (Imagine trying to impose a single language on all of Europe.) So, English has continued – guiltily, unofficially, and by default – to consolidate its base. Guilt in this case is an unhelpful sentiment. India as a country, a nation-state, was a British idea. So, the idea of English is as good or as bad as the idea of India itself. Writing or speaking in English is not a tribute to the British Empire, as the British imperial historian had tried to

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suggest; it is a practical solution to the circumstances created by it.

Fundamentally, India is in many ways still an empire, its territories held together by its armed forces and administered from Delhi, which, for most of her subjects, is as distant as any foreign metropole. If India had broken up into language republics, as countries in Europe did, then perhaps English could now be done away with. But even still, not really, not any time soon. As things stand, English, although it is spoken by a small minority (which still numbers in the tens of millions), is the language of mobility, of opportunity, of the courts, of the national press, the legal fraternity, of science, engineering, and international communication. It is the language of privilege and exclusion. It is also the language of emancipation, the language in which privilege has been eloquently denounced. *Annihilation of Caste* by Dr B. R. Ambedkar, the most widely read, widely translated, and devastating denunciation of the Hindu caste system, was written in English. It revolutionized the debate on perhaps the most brutal system of institutionalized injustice that any society has ever dreamt up. How different things would have been had the privileged castes managed to contain Ambedkar's writing in a language that only his own caste and community could read. Inspired by him, many Dalit activists today see the denial of a quality English education to the underprivileged (in the name of nationalism or

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anti-colonialism) as a continuation of the Brahmin tradition of denying education and literacy – or, for that matter, simply the right to pursue knowledge and accumulate wealth – to people they consider ‘shudras’ and ‘outcastes’. To make this point, in 2011 the Dalit scholar Chandra Bhan Prasad built a village temple to the Dalit goddess of English. ‘She is the symbol of Dalit Renaissance,’ he said. ‘We will use English to rise up the ladder and become free forever.’²

As the wrecking ball of the new global economic order goes about its work, moving some people towards the light, pushing others into darkness, the ‘knowing’ and the ‘not knowing’ of English plays a great part in allocating light and darkness.

It is onto this mind-bending mosaic that the current Hindu nationalist ruling dispensation is trying to graft its ‘One nation, one religion, one language’ vision. Since its inception in the 1920s, the rallying cry of the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) – Hindu nationalism’s holding company and the most powerful organization in India today – has been ‘Hindi-Hindu-Hindustan’. Ironically, all three are words derived from the Persian-Arabic *al-Hind*, and Hindustan – its suffix *-stan* (place), not to be confused with *sthan*, which also means ‘place’ in Sanskrit – was the region that lay east of the River Indus. ‘Hindus’ were the peoples (not the religion) that lived there. It would be too much to expect the RSS to learn from other countries’

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experiences, but when the Islamic Republic of Pakistan tried to impose Urdu on its Bengali-speaking citizens in East Pakistan, it ended up losing half of itself. Sri Lanka tried to impose Sinhala on its Tamil citizens, and paid with decades of bloody civil war.

All this is to say that we in India live and work (and write) in a complicated land, in which nothing is or ever will be settled. Especially not the question of language. Languages.

Susan Sontag was surely aware of some of this complexity when she delivered the W. G. Sebald Lecture in 2002. Her lecture was called ‘The World as India: Translation as a Passport Within the Community of Literature’. What I’ll talk about is ‘Translation as a Writing Strategy in a Community Without Passports’.

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Twenty years after the publication of *The God of Small Things* I finished writing my second novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Perhaps I shouldn’t say this, but if a novel can have an enemy, then the enemy of this novel is the idea of ‘One nation, one religion, one language’. As I composed the cover page of my manuscript, in place of the author’s name I was tempted to write: ‘Translated from the original(s) by Arundhati Roy’. *The Ministry* is a novel written in English but imagined in several languages. Translation as a *primary* form of creation was central to the writing of it (and here I don’t

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mean the translation of the inchoate and the pre-lingual into words). Regardless of in which language (and in whose mother tongue) *The Ministry* was written, this particular narrative about these particular people in this particular universe had to be imagined in several languages. It is a story that emerges out of an ocean of languages, in which a teeming ecosystem of living creatures – official-language fish, unofficial-dialect molluscs, and flashing shoals of word-fish – swim around, some friendly with each other, some openly hostile, and some outright carnivorous. But they are all nourished by what the ocean provides. And all of them, like the people in *The Ministry*, have no choice but to coexist, to survive, and to try to understand each other. For them, translation is not a high-end literary art performed by sophisticated polyglots. Translation is daily life, it is street activity, and it's increasingly a necessary part of ordinary folks' survival kit. And so, in this novel of many languages, it is not only the author, but also the characters themselves who swim around in an ocean of exquisite imperfection, who constantly translate for and to each other, who constantly speak across languages, and who constantly realize that people who speak the same language are not necessarily the ones who understand each other best.

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness has been – is being – translated into forty-eight languages. Each of those translators has had to grapple with a language

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that is infused with many languages including, if I may coin a word, many kinds of Englishes ('sociolects' is perhaps the correct word, but I'll stay with Englishes because it is deliciously worse) and translate it into another language that is *infused* with many languages. I use the word 'infused' advisedly, because I am not speaking merely of a text that contains a smattering of quotations or words in other languages as a gimmick or a trope, or one that plays the Peter Sellers game of mocking Indian English, but of an attempt to actually create a *companionship* of languages.

Of the forty-eight translations, two are Urdu and Hindi. As we will soon see, the very requirement of having to name Hindi and Urdu as separate languages, and publish them as separate books with separate scripts, contains a history that is folded into the story of *The Ministry*. Given the setting of the novel, the Hindi and Urdu translations are, in part, a sort of homecoming. I soon learned that this did nothing to ease the task of the translators. To give you an example: The human body and its organs play an important part in *The Ministry*. We found that Urdu, that most exquisite of languages, which has more words for love than perhaps any other in the world, has no word for vagina. There are words like the Arabic *furj*, which is considered to be archaic and more or less obsolete, and there are euphemisms that range in meaning from 'hidden part', 'breathing hole', 'vent', and 'path to the uterus'. The

most commonly used one is *aurat ki sharamgah*, ‘a woman’s place of shame’. As you can see, we had trouble on our hands. Before we rush to judgement, we must remember that *pudenda* in Latin means ‘that whereof one should feel shame’. In Danish, I was told by my translator, the phrase is ‘lips of shame’. So, Adam and Eve are alive and well, their fig leaves firmly in place.

Although I am tempted to say more about witnessing the pleasures and difficulties of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* being translated into other languages, more than the ‘post-writing’ translations, it is the ‘pre-writing’ translation that I want to talk about today. None of it came from an elaborate, pre-existing plan. I worked purely by instinct. It is only while preparing for this lecture that I began to see just how much it mattered to me to persuade languages to shift around, to make room for each other. Before we dive into the Ocean of Imperfection and get caught up in the eddies and whirlpools of our historic blood feuds and language wars, in order to give you a rough idea of the terrain I will quickly chart the route by which I arrived at my particular patch of the shoreline.

My mother is a Syrian Christian from Kerala – the Malayalam-speaking southernmost tip of the Indian peninsula. My father was a Bengali from Kolkata, which is where the two met. At the time, he was visiting from Assam, where he had a job as an assistant manager of a tea garden. The language they had in common was

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English. I was born in the Welsh Mission Hospital in the little town of Shillong, then in Assam, now the capital of the state of Meghalaya. The predominant hill tribe in Shillong is the Khasi, their language an Austroasiatic one, related to Cambodian and Mon. The Welsh missionaries of Shillong, like missionaries all over India, went to great lengths to turn oral languages into written ones, primarily in order to translate and print the Bible. As part of their own campaign to preserve the Welsh language against the tidal wave of English, they ensured that while Khasi is written in Roman script, its orthography is similar to that of Welsh.

The first two years of my life were spent in Assam. Even before I was born, my parents' relationship had broken down irretrievably. While they quarrelled, I was farmed out to the tea plantation workers' quarters, where I learned my first language, which my mother informs me was a kind of Hindi. The tea workers, living on starvation wages, were (and are) among the most brutally oppressed and exploited people in India. They are descendants of indigenous tribespeople of eastern and central India, whose own languages had been broken down and subsumed into Baganiya, which literally means 'garden language'. It is a patois of Hindi, Axomiya, and their own languages. Baganiya was the language I first spoke. I was less than three years old when my parents separated. My mother, my brother, and I moved to South India – first to Ootacamund in

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Tamil Nadu and then (unwelcomed) to my grandmother's home in Ayemenem, the village in Kerala where *The God of Small Things* is set. I soon forgot my Baganiya. (Many years later, when I was in my twenties, I encountered my cheerful but distressingly alcoholic father for the first time. The very first question he asked me was, 'Do you still use bad language?' I had no idea what he meant. 'Oh, you were a terrible, foul-mouthed little girl,' he said, and went on to tell me about how, when he had accidentally brushed a lit cigarette against my arm, I had glared at him and called him a *choo . . . ya* – an expletive in several languages, including Baganiya, whose etymology derives from the Latin *pudenda*.)

When I was five, my utterly moneyless mother started her own school by renting, by day, a small hall that belonged to the Rotary Club in the town of Kottayam, a short bus ride away. Every evening we would pack away our tables and chairs, and put them out again in the morning. I grew up on a cultural diet that included Shakespeare, Kipling, Kathakali (a temple dance form), and *The Sound of Music*, as well as Malayalam and Tamil cinema. Before I reached my teenage years, I could recite long passages of Shakespeare, sing Christian hymns in the mournful Malayali way, and mimic a cabaret from the outlandish Tamil film called *Jesus* which Mary Magdalene performs to (literally) seduce Jesus at a party – before things began to go badly wrong for both of them.

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As her little school grew successful, my mother, anxious about my career prospects, decreed that I was to speak only in English.³ Even in my off time. Each time I was caught speaking Malayalam, I was made to write what was called an imposition – *I will speak in English, I will speak in English* – a thousand times. Many hours of many afternoons were spent doing this (until I learned to recycle my impositions). At the age of ten I was sent to a boarding school in Tamil Nadu founded by the British hero Sir Henry Lawrence, who died defending the British Residency during the siege of Lucknow in the 1857 ‘Indian Mutiny’. He authored a legal code in the Punjab that forbade forced labour, infanticide, and the practice of *sati*, self-immolation by widows. Hard as it may be to accept, things aren’t always as simple as they’re made out to be.

The motto of our school was ‘Never Give In’. Many of us students believed (with no real basis) that what Lawrence had actually said was, ‘Never Give In – to the Indian Dogs’. In boarding school, in addition to Malayalam and English, I learned Hindi. My Hindi teacher was a Malayali who taught us a kind of Hindi in a kind of Malayalam. We understood nothing. We learned very little.

At sixteen, I finished school and found myself alone on a train to Delhi, which was three days and two nights away. (I didn’t know then that I was leaving home for good.) I was going to join the School of

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Architecture. I was armed with a single sentence of Hindi that I somehow remembered. It was from a lesson called *Swamibhakt Kutiya*, about a faithful dog who saves her master's baby from a snake by getting herself bitten instead. The sentence was: *Subah uth ke dekha to kutiya mari padi thi*, 'When I woke up in the morning, the bitch lay dead.' For the first few months in Delhi, it was my only contribution to any conversation or question addressed to me in Hindi. Over the years, this is the slender foundation on which, as my Malayalam became rusty, I built my Hindi vocabulary.

The architecture school hostel was, obviously, populated by out-of-towners. Mostly non-Hindi speakers. Bengalis, Assamese, Nagas, Manipuris, Nepalese, Sikkimese, Goans, Tamilians, Malayalees, Afghans. My first roommate was Kashmiri. My second Nepali. My closest friend was from Orissa. He spoke neither English nor Hindi. For most of our first year, we communicated in shared spliffs, sketches, cartoons, and maps drawn on the backs of envelopes – his extraordinary, mine mediocre. In time, we all learned to communicate with each other in standard Delhi University patois – a combination of English and Hindi – which was the language of my first screenplay, *In Which Annie Gives It Those Ones*, set in a fictional architecture school during the dope-smoking, bell-bottom-wearing era of the 1970s. Annie was the nickname of a male student, Anand Grover, repeating his final year for the fourth time. 'Giving it

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those ones' meant 'doing his or her usual thing'. In Annie's case, that meant peddling his pet thesis about reviving the rural economy and reversing rural–urban migration by planting fruit trees on either side of the hundreds of thousands of miles of railway tracks in India. Why the railway tracks? Because 'general *janta*' (ordinary folks) 'shits near the railway tracks anyway, *hai na?* So the soil is bloody fertile, *yaar.*' Directed by Pradip Krishen, the no-budget film was made on what must have been the cost of backup clapboards for a modest Hollywood movie.

Our publicity brochure for the film (which no one was really interested in) had the following quotes:

'You'll have to change the title, because "Giving It Those Ones" doesn't mean anything in English.'

– Derek Malcolm of the *Guardian*,
waking up suddenly in the middle of the film

'Obviously, Mr Malcolm, in England you don't speak English any more.'

– Arundhati Roy, later,
wishing she had thought of it earlier

The film was shown just once, late at night on Doordarshan, state television. It went on to win two National Awards – one for the Best Screenplay and the other, my favourite award of all time, for Best Film in

Languages Other Than Those Specified in Schedule VIII of the Indian Constitution. (I should say here that, in 2015, we returned both awards as part of a protest initiated by writers and filmmakers against what we saw as the current government's complicity in a series of assassinations of writers and rationalist thinkers, as well as the daylight lynching of Muslims and Dalits by mobs of vigilantes. It didn't help. The lynching continues, and we have run out of National Awards to return.)⁴

Writing screenplays – I wrote two – taught me to write dialogue. And it taught me how to write sparsely and economically. But then I began to yearn for excess. I longed to write about the landscape of my childhood, about the people in Ayemenem, about the river that flowed through it, the trees that bent into it, the moon, the sky, the fish, the songs, the History House, and the unnamed terrors that lurked around. I could not bear the idea of writing something that began with *Scene 1. Ext. Day. River*. I wanted to write a stubbornly visual but unfilmable book. That book turned out to be *The God of Small Things*. I wrote it in English, but imagined it in English as well as Malayalam, the landscapes and languages colliding in the heads of seven-year-old twins Esthappen and Rahel, turning into a thing of its own. So, for example, when their mother, Ammu, scolds the twins and tells them that if they ever disobey her in public she will send them somewhere where they learn to ‘jolly well

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behave' – it's the well that jumps out at them. The deep, moss-lined well that you find in the compounds of many homes in Kerala, with a pulley and a bucket and a rope; the well children are sternly warned to stay away from until they are big enough to draw water. What could a Jolly Well possibly be? A well with happy people in it. But *people* in a well? They'd have to be dead, of course. So, in Estha's and Rahel's imagination, a Jolly Well becomes a well full of laughing dead people, into which children are sent to learn to behave. The whole novel is constructed around people, young and old, English-knowing and Malayalam-knowing, all grappling, wrestling, dancing, and rejoicing in language.

For me, or for most contemporary writers working in these parts, language can never be a given. It has to be made. It has to be cooked. Slow-cooked.

It was only after writing *The God of Small Things* that I felt the blood in my veins flow more freely. It was an unimaginable relief to have finally found a language that tasted like mine. A language in which I could write the way I think. A language that freed me. The relief didn't last long. As Estha always knew, 'things can change in a day'.⁵

In March 1998, less than a year after *The God of Small Things* was published, a Hindu nationalist government came to power. The first thing it did was to conduct a series of nuclear tests. Something convulsed. Something changed. It was about language again. Not a writer's

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private language, but a country's public language, its public imagination of itself. Suddenly, things that would have been unthinkable to say in public became acceptable. Officially acceptable. Virile national pride, which had more to do with hate than love, flowed like noxious lava on the streets. Dismayed by the celebrations even in the most unexpected quarters, I wrote my first political essay, 'The End of Imagination'. My language changed, too. It wasn't slow-cooked. It wasn't secret, novel-writing language. It was quick, urgent, and public. And it was straight-up English.

Rereading 'The End of Imagination' now, it is sobering to see how clear the warning signs were, to anybody, just about anybody, who cared to heed them:

'These are not just nuclear tests, they are nationalism tests,' we were repeatedly told.

This has been hammered home, over and over again. 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. (Of course, in Pakistan the bomb is Islamic. Other than that, politically, the same physics applies.) This is one of the unexpected perks of having a nuclear bomb. Not only can the government use it to threaten the Enemy, it can use it to declare war on its own people. Us . . .