

# *Peace & The New Corporate Liberation Theology*

Arundhati Roy

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2004 City of Sydney Peace Prize Lecture  
Author: Arundhati Roy

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City of Sydney Peace Prize Lecture 2004

**Arundhati Roy**

**Peace & The New Corporate Liberation Theology**

It's official now. The Sydney Peace Foundation is neck deep in the business of gambling and calculated risk. Last year, very courageously, it chose Dr Hanan Ashrawi of Palestine for the Sydney Peace Prize. And, as if that were not enough, this year – of all the people in the world – it goes and chooses me!

However I'd like to make a complaint. My sources inform me that Dr Ashrawi had a picket all to herself. This is discriminatory. I demand equal treatment for all Peace Prizees. May I formally request the Foundation to organize a picket against me after the lecture? From what I've heard, it shouldn't be hard to organise. If this is insufficient notice, then tomorrow will suit me just as well.

When this year's Sydney Peace Prize was announced, I was subjected to some pretty arch remarks from those who know me well: Why did they give it to the biggest trouble-maker we know? Didn't anybody tell them that you don't have a peaceful bone in your body? And, memorably, Arundhati *didi* what's the Sydney Peace Prize? Was there a war in Sydney that you helped to stop?

Speaking for myself, I am utterly delighted to receive the Sydney Peace Prize. But I must accept it as a literary prize that honours a writer for her writing, because contrary to the many virtues that are falsely attributed to me, I'm not an activist, nor the leader of any mass movement, and I'm certainly not the 'voice of the voiceless'. (We know of course there's really no such thing as the 'voiceless'. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard.) I am a writer who cannot claim to represent anybody but herself. So even though I would like to, it would be presumptuous of me to say that I accept this prize on *behalf* of those who are involved in the struggle of the powerless and the disenfranchised against the powerful. However, may I say I accept it as the Sydney Peace Foundation's expression of solidarity with a kind of politics, a kind of world-view, that millions of us around the world subscribe to?

It might seem ironic that a person who spends most of her time thinking of strategies of resistance and plotting to disrupt the putative peace, is given a peace prize. You must remember that I come from an essentially feudal country – and there are few things more disquieting than a feudal peace. Sometimes there's truth in old clichés. There can be no real peace without justice. And without resistance there will be no justice.

Today, it is not merely justice itself, but the *idea* of justice that is under attack. The assault on vulnerable, fragile sections of society is at once so complete, so cruel and so clever – all encompassing and yet specifically targeted, blatantly brutal and yet unbelievably insidious – that its sheer audacity has eroded our definition of justice. It has forced us to lower our sights, and curtail our expectations. Even among the well-intentioned, the expansive, magnificent concept of justice is gradually being substituted with the reduced, far more fragile discourse of ‘human rights’.

If you think about it, this is an alarming shift of paradigm. The difference is that notions of equality, of parity have been pried loose and eased out of the equation. It’s a process of attrition. Almost unconsciously, we begin to think of justice for the rich and human rights for the poor. Justice for the corporate world, human rights for its victims. Justice for Americans, human rights for Afghans and Iraqis. Justice for the Indian upper castes, human rights for Dalits and Adivasis (if that). Justice for white Australians, human rights for Aboriginals and immigrants (most times, not even that.)

It is becoming more than clear that violating human rights is an inherent and necessary part of the process of implementing a coercive and unjust political and economic structure on the world. Without the violation of human rights on an enormous scale, the neo-liberal project would remain in the dreamy realm of policy. But increasingly human rights violations are being portrayed as the unfortunate, almost accidental fallout of an otherwise acceptable political and economic system. As though they’re a small problem that can be mopped up with a little extra attention from some NGOs. This is why in areas of heightened conflict – in Kashmir and in Iraq for example – Human Rights Professionals are regarded with a degree of suspicion. Many resistance movements in poor countries which are fighting huge injustice and questioning the underlying principles of what constitutes ‘liberation’ and ‘development’, view Human Rights NGOs as modern day missionaries who’ve come to take the ugly edge off Imperialism. To defuse political anger and to maintain the status quo.

It has been only a few weeks since a majority of Australians voted to re-elect Prime Minister John Howard who, among other things, led Australia to participate in the illegal invasion and occupation of Iraq. The invasion of Iraq will surely go down in history as one of the most cowardly wars ever fought. It was a war in which a band of rich nations, armed with enough nuclear weapons to destroy the world several times over, rounded on a poor nation, falsely accused it of having nuclear weapons, used the United Nations to force it to disarm, then invaded it, occupied it and are now in the process of selling it.

I speak of Iraq, not because everybody is talking about it, (sadly at the cost of leaving other horrors in other places to unfurl in the dark), but because it is a sign of things to come. Iraq marks

the beginning of a new cycle. It offers us an opportunity to watch the Corporate-Military cabal that has come to be known as 'Empire' at work. In the new Iraq the gloves are off.

As the battle to control the world's resources intensifies, economic colonialism through formal military aggression is staging a comeback. Iraq is the logical culmination of the process of corporate globalisation in which neo-colonialism and neo-liberalism have fused. If we can find it in ourselves to peep behind the curtain of blood, we would glimpse the pitiless transactions taking place backstage. But first, briefly, the stage itself.

In 1991 US President George Bush senior mounted Operation Desert Storm. Tens of thousands of Iraqis were killed in the war. Iraq's fields were bombed with more than 300 tonnes of depleted uranium, causing a fourfold increase in cancer among children. For more than 13 years, twenty-four million Iraqi people have lived in a war zone and been denied food and medicine and clean water. In the frenzy around the US elections, let's remember that the levels of cruelty did not fluctuate whether the Democrats or the Republicans were in the White House. Half a million Iraqi children died because of the regime of economic sanctions in the run up to Operation Shock and Awe. Until recently, while there was a careful record of how many US soldiers had lost their lives, we had no idea of how many Iraqis had been killed. US General Tommy Franks said "We don't do body counts" (meaning Iraqi body counts). He could have added "We don't do the Geneva Convention either." A new, detailed study, fast-tracked by the Lancet medical journal and extensively peer reviewed, estimates that 100,000 Iraqis have lost their lives since the 2003 invasion. That's one hundred halls full of people – like this one. That's one hundred halls full of friends, parents, siblings, colleagues, lovers....like you. The difference is that there aren't many children here today...let's not forget Iraq's children. Technically that bloodbath is called precision bombing. In ordinary language, it's called butchering.

Most of this is common knowledge now. Those who support the invasion and vote for the invaders cannot take refuge in ignorance. They must truly believe that this epic brutality is right and just or, at the very least, acceptable because it's in their interest.

So the 'civilised' 'modern' world – built painstakingly on a legacy of genocide, slavery and colonialism – now controls most of the world's oil. And most of the world's weapons, most of the world's money, and most of the world's media. The embedded, corporate media in which the doctrine of Free Speech has been substituted by the doctrine of Free If You Agree Speech.

The UN's Chief Weapons Inspector Hans Blix said he found no evidence of nuclear weapons in Iraq. Every scrap of evidence produced by the US and British governments was found to be false – whether it was reports of Saddam Hussein buying uranium from Niger, or the report produced by British Intelligence which was discovered to have been plagiarised from an old student dissertation. And yet, in the prelude to the war, day after day the most 'respectable' newspapers

and TV channels in the US, headlined the 'evidence' of Iraq's arsenal of nuclear weapons. It now turns out that the source of the manufactured 'evidence' of Iraq's arsenal of nuclear weapons was Ahmed Chalabi who, (like General Suharto of Indonesia, General Pinochet of Chile, the Shah of Iran, the Taliban and of course, Saddam Hussein himself), was bankrolled with millions of dollars from the good old CIA.

And so, a country was bombed into oblivion. It's true there have been some murmurs of apology. *Sorry 'bout that folks, but we really have to move on. Fresh rumours are coming in about nuclear weapons in Eye-ran and Syria.* And guess who is reporting on these fresh rumours? The same reporters who ran the bogus 'scoops' on Iraq. The seriously embedded A Team.

The head of Britain's BBC had to step down and one man committed suicide because a BBC reporter accused the Blair administration of 'sexing up' intelligence reports about Iraq's WMD programme. But the head of Britain retains his job even though his government did much more than 'sex up' intelligence reports. It is responsible for the illegal invasion of a country and the mass murder of its people.

Visitors to Australia like myself, are expected to answer the following question when they fill in the visa form: *Have you ever committed or been involved in the commission of war crimes or crimes against humanity or human rights? Would George Bush and Tony Blair get visas to Australia? Under the tenets of International Law they must surely qualify as war criminals.*

However, to imagine that the world would change if they were removed from office is naïve. The tragedy is that their political rivals have no real dispute with their policies. The fire and brimstone of the US election campaign was about who would make a better 'Commander-in-Chief' and a more effective manager of the American Empire. Democracy no longer offers voters real choice. Only specious choice.

Even though no weapons of mass destruction have been found in Iraq – stunning new evidence has revealed that Saddam Hussein was *planning* a weapons programme. (Like I was planning to win an Olympic Gold in synchronized swimming.) Thank goodness for the doctrine of pre-emptive strike. God knows what other evil thoughts he harboured - sending Tampax in the mail to American senators, or releasing female rabbits in burqas into the London underground. No doubt all will be revealed in the free and fair trial of Saddam Hussein that's coming up soon in the New Iraq.

All except the chapter in which we would learn of how the US and Britain plied him with money and material assistance at the time he was carrying out murderous attacks on Iraqi Kurds and Shias. All except the chapter in which we would learn that a 12,000 page report submitted by the Saddam Hussein government to the UN, was censored by the United States because it lists

twenty-four US corporations that participated in Iraq's pre-Gulf War nuclear and conventional weapons programme. (They include Bechtel, DuPont, Eastman Kodak, Hewlett Packard, International Computer Systems and Unisys.)

So Iraq has been 'liberated.' Its people have been subjugated and its markets have been 'freed'. That's the anthem of neo-liberalism. Free the markets. Screw the people.

The US government has privatised and sold entire sectors of Iraq's economy. Economic policies and tax laws have been re-written. Foreign companies can now buy 100% of Iraqi firms and expatriate the profits. This is an outright violation of international laws that govern an occupying force, and is among the main reasons for the stealthy, hurried charade in which power was 'handed over' to an 'interim Iraqi government'. Once handing over of Iraq to the multi-nationals is complete, a mild dose of genuine democracy won't do any harm. In fact it might be good PR for the Corporate version of Liberation Theology, otherwise known as New Democracy.

Not surprisingly, the auctioning of Iraq caused a stampede at the feeding trough. Corporations like Bechtel and Halliburton, the company that US Vice-President Dick Cheney once headed, have won huge contracts for 'reconstruction' work. A brief cv of any one of these corporations would give us a lay person's grasp of how it all works – not just in Iraq, but all over the world. Say we pick Bechtel – only because poor little Halliburton is under investigation on charges of overpricing fuel deliveries to Iraq and for its contracts to 'restore' Iraq's oil industry which came with a pretty serious price-tag – 2.5 billion dollars.

The Bechtel Group and Saddam Hussein are old business acquaintances. Many of their dealings were negotiated by none other than Donald Rumsfeld. In 1988, after Saddam Hussein gassed thousands of Kurds, Bechtel signed contracts with his government to build a dual-use chemical plant in Baghdad.

Historically, the Bechtel Group has had and continues to have inextricably close links to the Republican establishment. You could call Bechtel and the Reagan/Bush Administration a team. Former Secretary of Defense, Caspar Weinberger was a Bechtel general counsel. Former Deputy Secretary of Energy, W. Kenneth Davis was Bechtel's vice president. Riley Bechtel, the company chairman, is on the President's Export Council. Jack Sheehan, a retired marine corps general, is a senior vice president at Bechtel and a member of the US Defense Policy Board. Former Secretary of State George Shultz, who is on the Board of Directors of the Bechtel Group, was the chairman of the advisory board of the Committee for the Liberation of Iraq.

When he was asked by the New York Times whether he was concerned about the appearance of a conflict of interest between his two 'jobs', he said, "I don't know that Bechtel would particularly benefit from it [The invasion of Iraq]. But if there's work to be done, Bechtel is the type of

company that could do it." Bechtel has been awarded reconstruction contracts in Iraq worth over a billion dollars, which include contracts to re-build power generation plants, electrical grids, water supply, sewage systems, and airport facilities. Never mind revolving doors, this – if it weren't so drenched in blood – would be a bedroom farce.

Between 2001 and 2002, nine out of thirty members of the US Defense Policy Group were connected to companies that were awarded Defense contracts worth 76 billion dollars. Time was when weapons were manufactured in order to fight wars. Now wars are manufactured in order to sell weapons.

Between 1990 and 2002 the Bechtel group has contributed \$3.3 million to campaign funds, both Republican and Democrat. Since 1990 it has won more than 2000 government contracts worth more than 11 billion dollars. That's an incredible return on investment, wouldn't you say? And Bechtel has footprints around the world. That's what being a multi-national means.

The Bechtel Group first attracted international attention when it signed a contract with Hugo Banzer, the former Bolivian dictator, to privatise the water supply in the city of Cochabamba. The first thing Bechtel did was to raise the price of water. Hundreds of thousands of people who simply couldn't afford to pay Bechtel's bills came out onto the streets. A huge strike paralysed the city. Martial law was declared. Although eventually Bechtel was forced to flee its offices, it is currently negotiating an exit payment of millions of dollars from the Bolivian government for the loss of potential profits. Which, as we'll see, is growing into a popular corporate sport.

In India, Bechtel along with General Electric are the new owners of the notorious and currently defunct Enron power project. The Enron contract, which legally binds the Government of the State of Maharashtra to pay Enron a sum of 30 billion dollars, was the largest contract ever signed in India. Enron was not shy to boast about the millions of dollars it had spent to 'educate' Indian politicians and bureaucrats. The Enron contract in Maharashtra, which was India's first 'fast-track' private power project, has come to be known as the most massive fraud in the country's history. (Enron was another of the Republican Party's major campaign contributors.) The electricity that Enron produced was so exorbitant that the government decided it was cheaper *not* to buy electricity and pay Enron the mandatory fixed charges specified in the contract. This means that the government of one of the poorest countries in the world was paying Enron 220 million US dollars a year *not* to produce electricity!

Now that Enron has ceased to exist, Bechtel and GE are suing the Indian Government for 5.6 billion US dollars. This is not even a minute fraction of the sum of money that they (or Enron) actually invested in the project. Once more, it's a projection of profit they *would* have made had the project materialised. To give you an idea of scale: 5.6 billion dollars is a little more than the amount that the Government of India would need annually, for a rural employment guarantee

scheme that would provide a subsistence wage to millions of people currently living in abject poverty, crushed by debt, displacement, chronic malnutrition and the WTO. This in a country where farmers steeped in debt are being driven to suicide, not in their hundreds, but in their thousands. The proposal for a Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme is being mocked by India's corporate class as an unreasonable, utopian demand being floated by the 'lunatic' and newly powerful left. "Where will the money come from?" they ask derisively. And yet, any talk of renegeing on a bad contract with a notoriously corrupt corporation like Enron, has the same cynics hyperventilating about capital flight and the terrible risks of 'creating a bad investment climate'. The arbitration between Bechtel, GE and the Government of India is taking place right now in London. Bechtel and GE have reason for hope. The Indian Finance Secretary who was instrumental in approving the disastrous Enron contract has come home after a few years with the IMF. Not just home, home with a promotion. He is now Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission.

Think about it: The *notional* profits of a single corporate project would be enough to provide a hundred days of employment a year at minimum wages (calculated at a weighted average across different states) for 25 million people. That's five million more than the population of Australia. That is the scale of the horror of neo-liberalism.

The Bechtel story gets worse. In what can only be called unconscionable, Naomi Klein writes that Bechtel has successfully sued war-torn Iraq for 'war reparations' and 'lost profits'. It has been awarded 7 million dollars.

So, all you young management graduates don't bother with Harvard and Wharton – here's the Lazy Manager's Guide to Corporate Success: First, stock your Board with senior government servants. Next, stock the government with members of your board. Add oil and stir. When no one can tell where the government ends and your company begins, collude with your government to equip and arm a cold-blooded dictator in an oil-rich country. Look away while he kills his own people. Simmer gently. Use the time to collect a few billion dollars in government contracts. Then collude with your government once again while it topples the dictator and bombs his subjects, taking to specifically target essential infrastructure, killing a hundred thousand people on the side. Pick up another billion dollars or so worth of contracts to 'reconstruct' the infrastructure. To cover travel and incidentals, sue for reparations for lost profits from the devastated country. Finally, diversify. Buy a TV station, so that next war around you can showcase your hardware and weapons technology masquerading as coverage of the war. And finally finally, institute a Human Rights Prize in your company's name. You could give the first one posthumously to Mother Teresa. She won't be able to turn it down or argue back.

Invaded and occupied Iraq has been made to pay out 200 million dollars in 'reparations' for lost profits to corporations like Halliburton, Shell, Mobil, Nestle, Pepsi, Kentucky Fried Chicken and

Toys R Us. That's apart from its 125 billion dollar sovereign debt forcing it to turn to the IMF, waiting in the wings like the angel of death, with its Structural Adjustment Program. (Though in Iraq there don't seem to be many structures left to adjust. Except the shadowy Al Qaeda.)

In New Iraq, privatisation has broken new ground. The US Army is increasingly recruiting private mercenaries to help in the occupation. The advantage with mercenaries is that when they're killed they're not included in the US soldiers' body count. It helps to manage public opinion, which is particularly important in an election year. Prisons have been privatised. Torture has been privatised. We have seen what that leads to. Other attractions in New Iraq include newspapers being shut down. Television stations bombed. Reporters killed. US soldiers have opened fire on crowds of unarmed protestors killing scores of people. The only kind of resistance that has managed to survive is as crazed and brutal as the occupation itself. Is there space for a secular, democratic, feminist, non-violent resistance in Iraq? There isn't really.

That is why it falls to those of us living outside Iraq to create that mass-based, secular and non-violent resistance to the US occupation. If we fail to do that, then we run the risk of allowing the idea of resistance to be hi-jacked and conflated with terrorism and that will be a pity because they are not the same thing.

So what does peace mean in this savage, corporatised, militarised world? What does it mean in a world where an entrenched system of appropriation has created a situation in which poor countries which have been plundered by colonising regimes for centuries are steeped in debt to the very same countries that plundered them, and have to repay that debt at the rate of 382 billion dollars a year? What does peace mean in a world in which the combined wealth of the world's 587 billionaires exceeds the combined gross domestic product of the world's 135 poorest countries? Or when rich countries that pay farm subsidies of a billion dollars a day, try and force poor countries to drop their subsidies? What does peace mean to people in occupied Iraq, Palestine, Kashmir, Tibet and Chechnya? Or to the aboriginal people of Australia? Or the Ogoni of Nigeria? Or the Kurds in Turkey? Or the Dalits and Adivasis of India? What does peace mean to non-muslims in Islamic countries, or to women in Iran, Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan? What does it mean to the millions who are being uprooted from their lands by dams and development projects? What does peace mean to the poor who are being actively robbed of their resources and for whom everyday life is a grim battle for water, shelter, survival and, above all, some semblance of dignity? For them, peace is war.

We know very well who benefits from war in the age of Empire. But we must also ask ourselves honestly who benefits from peace in the age of Empire? War mongering is criminal. But talking of peace without talking of justice could easily become advocacy for a kind of capitulation. And talking of justice without unmasking the institutions and the systems that perpetrate injustice, is beyond hypocritical.

It's easy to blame the poor for being poor. It's easy to believe that the world is being caught up in an escalating spiral of terrorism and war. That's what allows the American President to say "You're either with us or with the terrorists." But we know that that's a spurious choice. We know that terrorism is only the privatisation of war. That terrorists are the free marketers of war. They believe that the legitimate use of violence is not the sole prerogative of the State.

It is mendacious to make moral distinction between the unspeakable brutality of terrorism and the indiscriminate carnage of war and occupation. Both kinds of violence are unacceptable. We cannot support one and condemn the other.

The real tragedy is that most people in the world are trapped between the horror of a putative peace and the terror of war. Those are the two sheer cliffs we're hemmed in by. The question is: How do we climb out of this crevasse? For those who are materially well-off, but morally uncomfortable, the first question you must ask yourself is do you really want to climb out of it? How far are you prepared to go? Has the crevasse become too comfortable?

If you really want to climb out, there's good news and bad news. The good news is that the advance party began the climb some time ago. They're already half way up. Thousands of activists across the world have been hard at work preparing footholds and securing the ropes to make it easier for the rest of us. There isn't only one path up. There are hundreds of ways of doing it. There are hundreds of battles being fought around the world that need your skills, your minds, your resources. No battle is irrelevant. No victory is too small.

The bad news is that colourful demonstrations, weekend marches and annual trips to the World Social Forum are not enough. There have to be targeted acts of real civil disobedience with real consequences. Maybe we can't flip a switch and conjure up a revolution. But there are several things we could do. For example, you could make a list of those corporations who have profited from the invasion of Iraq and have offices here in Australia. You could name them, boycott them, occupy their offices and force them out of business. If it can happen in Bolivia, it can happen in India. It can happen in Australia. Why not?

That's only a small suggestion. But remember that if the struggle were to resort to violence, it will lose vision, beauty and imagination. Most dangerous of all, it will marginalise and eventually victimise women. And a political struggle that does not have women at the heart of it, above it, below it and within it is no struggle at all.

The point is that the battle must be joined. As the wonderful American historian Howard Zinn put it: You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train.

**ARUNDHATI ROY**