CREA's Rethink Evenings

#rethink evenings feature activists, artists and thinkers to advance bold, feminist and intersectional ways to rethink, reimagine and reboot their ideas, politics and practices on gender, sexuality, consent, ideas, politics and practices reimagining and rebooting their intersectional ways to rethink, to advance bold, feminist and activist, artists and thinkers #rethink evenings feature

CONSENT, BODILY INTEGRITY AND CHOICE
The Miss Curvy Pageant in Uganda
Kampala, Uganda - 3 April 2019 - 70-80 participants

BETWEEN 377 AND METEO: A Cross-regional and Inter-generational Conversation between Queer South Asian Feminists
New York, USA - 17 March 2019 - 50-60 participants

A Conversation on DESIRE: Mathavi Menon with Shohini Ghosh
New Delhi, India - 22 December 2019 - 110 participants

Thank you, deeply
Geetanjali Misra EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CREA

CREA has never shied away from big ideas, which is how we arrived at the dream of creating an event which combines deep scholarship and critical thinking with creative representations of pressing socio-political issues intersecting with art, technology and feminism.

The pedagogy of film and art has always been a part of CREA's work, but the scale of #recon2019 - with curation, installation, and screenings alongside critical faultline discussions is unprecedented. Since its inception, CREA has used art to influence different ways of thinking. Today, we need to extend a special thank you to all the people who envisaged and executed an experience in which the form of expression has been as critical and impactful as the content.

The spark for #recon2019 began in July 2018. This boundary-pushing event is the culmination of eight months of in-house work by an incredible team which ran with the idea of creating a feminist expo that was part film festival, part art installation, and part theoretical deep dive.

As CREA has undertaken the effort to build #recon2019, we have also learned and reflected - identifying issues such as technology and environmental justice - which will become more foundational parts of all of our work going forward. Ultimately, #recon2019 has been a part of our overall goal to not only change the way we think, but also the way we act. I am so proud to have worked beside brilliant teams to build this bold and radical event, but #recon2019 is only the beginning. The drive to rethink, reimagine and reboot has already inspired new streams of engagement, such as rethink evenings and tweetathons.

None of #recon2019 would have been possible without the dedicated support of several teams including the creative and strategic guidance of CREA board members, CREA advisors and working group members, the passionate participation of many constituencies and collaborating organizations, the inspired and devoted efforts of CREA staff and consultants from the design and production team, the communications team, the film and media team, and the logistics and event coordination team, as well as committed volunteers, our encouraging donors, and talented translators.

Thank you all for joining us to rethink resistance, reimagine change, and reboot our movements.
The Shore Line Project
An exhibition by Elizabeth Miller

The Shore Line Project is a storybook for a sustainable future. Meet 43 people from 9 countries discovering solutions. This is an interactive storybook, featuring stories from individuals across the globe – people who are working to protect the world’s oceans and coastlines. The project features over 40 short films organized into six chapters plus interactive maps, data visualizations, soundscapes and educational resources. It is a collaborative web documentary project across nine countries confronting the threats of unsustainable development and extreme weather with persistence and imagination.

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Up Down & Sideways
by Iswar Srikumar and Anushka Meenakshi

Close to the India-Myanmar border is the village of Phek in Nagaland. Around 5,000 people live here, almost all of who cultivate rice for their own consumption. As they work in cooperative groups – preparing the terraced fields, planting saplings, or harvesting the grain and carrying it up impossibly steep slopes – the rice cultivators of Phek sing. The seasons change, and so does the music, transforming the mundane into the hypnotic. The love that they sing of is also a metaphor for the need for the other – the friend, the family, the community, to build a polynony of voices. Stories of love, stories of the field, stories of song, stories in song. Up Down & Sideways is a musical portrait of a community of rice cultivators and their memories of love and loss, created from working together on the fields. It is the first feature film from the u-ca-zi-i project, a larger body of work that looks at the connections between music and labor.

In a note on the film, the filmmakers say, “Why do people sing when they work? Why have communities around the world relied on music to transform their experience of the everyday? The answers to such questions are not as satisfying as one would expect. What began as a research project very soon turned into an artistic enquiry and we felt the answer needed to be experienced rather than understood.”

Sweet Crude
by Sandy Cioffi

Sweet Crude is the story of Nigeria’s Niger Delta – the human and environmental consequences of 50 years of oil extraction, the history of non-violent protest, and the members of a new insurgency who, in the three years since the filmmakers met them as college students, became the young men of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND). Set against the stunning backdrop of the Niger Delta, the film gives voice to the region’s complex mix of stakeholders and invites the audience to learn the deeper story.

Beginning with filmmaker Sandy Cioffi’s initial trip to document the building of a library in a remote village, Sweet Crude is a journey of multi-layered revelation and ever-deepening questions. It’s about survival, corruption, greed and armed resistance. It’s about one place in one moment, with themes that echo many places throughout history.
Movement building in a digital age

JAC SM KEE

Networked technologies have significantly impacted the characteristics of movements worldwide, writes APC’s Jac SM Kee.

“Digitally networked technologies have seeded and enabled the proliferation of feminist expression in multiple spaces, from online journals to podcasts, digital archives, the humble comments section, digital storytelling projects, social media engagement and more. This has contributed to the most stubborn and invisible quadrant of change in the classic framework of how change happens: that of culture and norms, and in behavior, thoughts and values.

There are people who engage on social media as a political site of their everyday activism in pushing back against patriarchal discourse and norms, who face serious and critical backlash in response. Yet, women’s movements tend to instrumentalize our engagement with digitally networked technologies. There is an approach of ‘using social media to reach out to more people in the space of activism in and of itself.

In an age of unprecedented circulation of information, discourse, visuals and knowledge, there is a need to reimagine and understand better discourse as a site of activism, in and of itself, and its potential for deep transformative change.

In the digital age, we see new and emerging actors who are part of feminist organizing, but remain outside of the more familiar format of organizations. Some of them are content creators, some are social media activists, some part of interest-driven collectives, some are feminist techies, and some are what I like to call ‘free radicals’ – nodes that connect between formal organizing and informal networks who act as key bridge builders and interlocutors of different actors and different spaces. The internet and its capacity for anonymity and distance has also enabled actors who are different, of visibility for various reasons (e.g. risk, introverts, etc.) to participate actively and expressively in organizing for change.

The movement is, in fact, much more diverse and broader than imagined.”

This is an abridged version of Jac SM Kee’s article, published on genderit.org. The full text can be accessed at: https://www.genderit.org/editorial/making-feminist-internet-movement-building-digital-age.


1997. Writer Hari Kunzru grappled with the cyborg in a Wired article. “When Donna Haraway says she’s a cyborg, she’s not claiming to be different or special,” wrote Kunzru. “For Haraway, the realities of modern life happen to include a relationship between people and technology so intimate that it’s no longer possible to tell where we end and machines begin...If this sounds complicated, that’s because it is. Haraway’s world is one of tangled networks – part human, part machine; complex hybrids of meat and metal that relegate old-fashioned concepts like natural and artificial to the archives. These hybrid networks are the cyborgs, and they don’t just surround us – they incorporate us. An automated production line in a factory, an office computer network, a club of dancers, lights, and sound systems – all are cyber constructions of people and machines.”

2018. Writer Jillian Heise, author of The Amputee’s Guide To Sex, revisits the concept of the cyborg – from the point of view of a woman with a disability. Heise, who wears an artificial limb, writes:

“When I tell people I am a cyborg, they often ask, ‘If I have read Donna Haraway’s Cyborg Manifesto, Of course I have read it. And I disagree with it. The manifesto, published in 1985, promised a cyberfeminist resistance. The resistance would be networked and coded by women and for women to change the course of history and derange sexism beyond recognition. Technology would un-gender us.

Instead, it has been so effective at erasing disabled women that even now, in conversation with many feminists, I am no longer surprised that disability does not figure into their notions of bodies and embodiment. Haraway’s manifesto lays claim to cyborgs (we are all cyborgs) and defines the cyborg unilaterally through metaphor. To Haraway, the cyborg is a matter of fiction, a struggle over life and death, a modern war cry, a map, a condensed image, a creature without gender. The manifesto coopts cyborging and takes away the bodily presence andápex of disabled people on which the notion of the cyborg is premised. Disabled people who use tech to live are cyborgs. Our lives are not metaphors.”

Read Heise’s full article at: grantia.com/common-cyborg

Of cyborgs and disability

By Bishakha Datta, Point of View

Cyborg, by Lynn Randolph (1985). This image is the cover of Donna Haraway’s Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Re-invention of Nature.
Galaxies of Desires

Galaxies of Desires is a curated space that brings together two conference themes—consent as well as pleasure and danger. These form an integral part of human sexuality. Art and activism come together in this space to interrogate why pleasure has seldom been included in feminist movements, to reflect whether pleasures can be dangerous and dangers can be pleasurable, and to celebrate transgressions. It also explores the spectrum of consent. The space is imagined as galaxies—as limitless, feminist possibilities of how we understand, experience and express consent, pleasure and danger.

The ideas of consent, pleasure and danger are intricately linked, and the complex intertwining between the three ideas means that they are designed as one curated space. The space has messages, visuals and art, films followed by talks and interactive sessions that explore ideas of consent, pleasure and danger through different lenses.

The visual space has creative work from around the world. There is a poster from the Meer to Sleep campaign. The poster is about women reclaiming public spaces to do pleasurable things. Khangas adorn the walls, and speak of transgressive love. Khangas are traditional East African cotton fabrics printed in bold designs, usually with a message in Swahili that is typically heterosexual in nature. An artist takes this very traditional cloth and prints messages of queer love on them, thus making it a revolutionary project. A feminist board game shows inequalities between people based on their gender, sexual orientation, relationship status and disabilities. Photos of Pride from around the world have been displayed to celebrate same-sex love and desire.

Other visual treats include postcards and a photo-book by the renowned American photographer, Robert Mapplethorpe, a photo book by Serbian photographer Slobodan Randjelovic that captures the struggles of LGBTQ people in Serbia, and a vibrant independent art publication by multimedia artist Martine Guiterrez. Or would you fancy looking at erotic playing cards from the 1940s? In Plainspeak, a digital magazine from India that explores issues of sexuality, intimacy and choice is on offer. It is also available in the form of giveaways that can be picked up at the space.

The Bird Box, an audio-visual installation, invites people to look into a hand-painted binoscope with recordings of young girls speaking about desire, shame and freedom. The Bird Box and other videos will also be a part of a session planned on consent.

If you have ever wondered what elements consent encompasses, be sure to engage with the playful consent blocks in the space—they will challenge you to think about consent differently.

The film and interactive space brings together various artists and activists over the course of three days to engage with subversive ideas of consent, pleasure and danger. The interactions, presentations and films explore the nuances and the grey areas that are the very nature of these concepts. The space also explores the many meanings of consent through an interaction with a sex worker, an intersex activist and other activists. There are other conversations in the space—with the first Sri Lankan woman who climbed Mt Everest, a conversation with an artist from Kenya, and performances by queer and disabled activists. In the end, the curated space looks at consent, pleasure and desire through the lens of BDSM.

Do not miss out on experiencing this space—take a trip with us through the galaxies of desires!

Proudly African & Transgender

An exhibition by Gabrielle Le Roux

"The taboo on investigating pleasure led to an abstract sexual theory which bears little relationship to daily life. If theory is to have any valid relationship to experience, we need to acknowledge that sexuality is worth talking about seriously."

Carole S. Vance, Pleasure and Danger, 1984

Proudly African & Transgender is a creative intervention for social justice in the form of portraits and stories of ten transgender African activists who collaborated with South African artist and activist Le Roux to be portrayed in this way because they want to be seen and heard far and wide.

Mitti Nepal is a lesbian rights organization in Nepal. It works and lobbies for LGBT individuals and communities. It gives a platform for lesbian women to voice their issues and prioritize their concerns freely without these being diluted among the issues of gay men and transgender people.

Transgender Africans have been silenced for a long time. We have been invisible as though we did not exist. Today, many of us speak, we show our faces, we write and we express ourselves openly. This exhibition is an extension of that. The portraits are our images and they speak our words, they tell our stories, they express our feelings, they exhibit our pride, even our fears, they are our history, they are us today and the history of the African transgender struggle in future. They are strength, hope and pride to generations after us.

I felt lost for a long time. I thought that there was no other like me. I thought I was abnormal, strange and this made me powerless. My transgender niece or nephew, grandchild or friend’s child will not feel lost. They will look at my portrait and they will gain power, hope, peace of mind and pride. They will know that another transgender person [person] existed before and that it is okay to be gender non-conforming.

When the world sees our portraits, they will know that Africa has transgender people and that there is a struggle against injustices on our continent."

Thus wrote Victor Mukasa, expressing the vision and intention of the exhibition, both as the person with whom Gabrielle Le Roux envisioned this project for a number of years, and also as one of the people portrayed in it.

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Welcome to our lives in the digital age: online on ground physical digital. Phygital...or tangled like wool. In an earlier age, our bodies ended where skin touched air. Where do our bodies end now? Is our digital data part of our bodies? If so, how do we rethink bodily integrity? How do we reimagine sexuality? Consent? Sports? Justice? Really... almost everything?

#100TinderTales

“I have been a loner all my life. Then five months ago, a colleague introduced me to Tinder, and I logged on. After looking at a few girls’ profiles, I switched to swiping on people from the same sex. I was just curious to see how it worked and how men initiate conversations with other men. I was amazed that every second person I was swiping right matched with me. I had several conversations with many men, but none clicked.

Then one day, I happened to meet someone very interesting. Soon numbers were exchanged and we talked about cars, hikes, politics, sports and video games. I was confused—was this the reason I had joined Tinder? No. To have general, casual conversations with people around me? Not at all.

We decided to meet for beer and the agenda was to have a detailed debate on the current political situation. Imagine! We got very drunk, had heated arguments, and ended up becoming great friends. He was extremely good looking, neat and balanced—and so am I, I believe. At around 2 am, we sat in our respective cars and said goodbye. At the traffic signal, I got a call from him: ‘My car is behind yours, and if you didn’t mind the arguments, let’s talk for some more time.’ We drove to his apartment for another round of beers.

And then came a sight hug, followed by a kiss.

It was the first time I was kissed by a guy and I lost myself in him. It was followed by very passionate sex. Though it was slightly painful, I loved it. I never thought my first Tinder date would be so pleasurable!

I stayed with him for one full day and night, as it was the weekend, and we loved each other up like anything. There was sex and conversations on the sofa, in the kitchen, in the washroom, on the carpet, and in every possible place in the apartment. He didn’t want me to leave. The best part was that there was a lot of respect and genuine love, which reflected in our attitude towards each other.

We met several times after that, and still meet: the connection has grown stronger. There is no commitment but just good vibes, and of course, great sex.”

All the #100TinderTales can be viewed on Facebook and Instagram.

The biometric trap

Here are four stories on the dangers of biometrics from the People’s Archive of Rural India (PAIR).

**INDU**

“My name is Indu, but my first Aadhaar card made it ‘Hindu’. So, I applied for a new card, but they made it ‘Hindu’ again.”

Because of a spelling error, J. Indu, a 10-year-old Dalit girl won’t get her school scholarship this year. Without an Aadhaar card with a correctly spell name, India’s school cannot open a bank account on her behalf—and cannot deposit the scholarship money that she is entitled to for her school provisions, books and clothes.

**PARWATI**

“I am told that my hands are not fit to be placed on the [finger printing] machine... This Aadhaar must be a good thing. But why must it not be given to people like me whose hands god takes away for no fault of theirs? Are we not the ones who need it most?”

51-year-old Parwati is a migrant waste picker in the north of India. For the past three years, her fingers have been stumped by leprosy, so she cannot get an Aadhaar card.

Without this, she cannot get the disability pension that she is entitled to. Nor can she get rations, because she now needs an Aadhaar card to verify her credentials at the ration shop.

The ration shop owner has known Parwati for years, but what can he do? “We have to do as the machine says,” he sighs.

**DHARI RAM**

“It takes more than 500 rupees to travel, spend a day there and then come back. How can I afford that? It’s better I die here without an Aadhaar card.”

Dhari Ram, a 67-year-old former labourer depends entirely on his old age pension. But his pension has stopped; the government stopped giving it to those who did not submit their Aadhaar details. Dhari Ram did register his details. But the name on his Aadhaar card does not match the name in the records. To get this corrected, Dhari Ram needs to travel to the nearest Aadhaar centre—146 km away from his village.

**LAKSHMI**

“They keep saying that there is some ‘technical problem’ but don’t explain what that is.”

T. Lakshmi has not got her wages for several months. Nor has P. Lakshmi, who lives in another village nearby. Both women are Dalit, have no land, and work as laborers. When the government insisted on linking Aadhaar cards to employment scheme cards, a processing error led to the women’s payments getting swapped. And because their bank accounts are also linked to their cards, neither can withdraw the other person’s money.

**LET’S RETHINK ONLINE SPORTS**

Here’s a one-question quiz that will give you an answer. Or think about.

Online sports should not be segregated for men and women.
Creating a flock of CREA birds

During your time at #recon2019 you may have noticed the captivating woodcut bird-women incorporated into the design. These birds are a metaphor for this gathering, and for the way in which CREA undertakes its work.

Birds are colorful, diverse, and come in many forms. You can spot a vibrant toucan flying through the sky, or watch a regal blue jay strut through the garden from your kitchen window.

The birds symbolize embracing diversity and beauty in different contexts. For CREA, they are a metaphor for our organization itself, and the result of a yearlong visioning process in which the staff sought to find a symbol to encapsulate our work and ourselves.

CREA is a fearless, interrogative, colorful, edgy, sexy flock of birds flying freely to explore, to imagine and to build freedoms together. The birds, each one unique and yet all moving together in formation, are a part of CREA’s identity.

To create visual imagery which captured this symbolism, CREA commissioned independent artists to interpret the metaphor. In order to truly align with CREA’s self-definition, the artwork needed to represent a distinct character and personality, while simultaneously avoiding heteronormative depictions of bodies or defaulting to stereotypes of diversity or disability.

The resulting birds are individuals, with each artwork depicting different bodies, plural gender identities, non-normative and diverse sexualities and expressions. Each of these extraordinary birds is different, but every single bird can soar.

To date, the striking birds displayed at #recon2019 embody the creations of artists living and working in India, Nepal, Kenya and Sri Lanka. The aim of commissioning these birds was to enable these global artists to embrace the freedom of expression to allow everyone over here over the last three days to find something of themselves reflected back. The bird-woman amalgams defy conformist restrictions to ascend higher and higher.

Our dream is that you will also take flight alongside of us, and continue together with CREA in the ongoing creation of these symbolic images and in carrying forward the metaphor these birds – always questioning and challenging conventional ideals of bodies, sexuality, gender, beauty, pleasure and people – represented during our time together at #recon2019.

ILLUSTRATIONS OF BIRD PEOPLE BY
Afrah Shafiq (India)
Anirban Ghosh (India)
Karish Shashi (India)
Kawira Mwiritcha (Kenya)
Michelle Lama (Nepal)
Osheen Siva (India)
Pavan Buragohain (India)
Priyanka Kumar (India)
Shifani Reffai (Sri Lanka)
Thilini Perera (Sri Lanka)
Val Resh (India)
Funding Feminist Futures

Supporting constituencies to demand their own rights involves funding their own priorities and projects. This is particularly true for young people, who may have less experience navigating donor landscapes, leading to a lack of funding for the very initiatives that will become the movements of the future.

Traditional donor-grantee relationships often fail to address new, lived realities and the innovative, grassroots ideas that can combat emerging risks and pressing challenges. For that reason, we would like to take a moment to appreciate the work of our activist donor partners (UHAI-EASRI, the Disability Rights Fund, the Red Umbrella Fund and FRIDA The Young Feminist Fund), for their flexible and forward-thinking commitment to funding young feminists.

The practice of activists embedding within participatory grant making has been growing in recent years. Though it has existed in various forms for some time, there has been mounting attention to the reasons for and structures of participatory grant making over the past ten years, with these donor partners leading the way. While they have unique structures for peer engagement, each of these donors significantly includes the communities they support, in both governance and grants decision-making.

FRIDA The Young Feminist Fund is an entirely participatory decision-making process in which applicants work together to decide which proposed activities and ideas are ultimately funded.

The Disability Rights Fund is a collaboration between donors and the disability rights community. Grant and governance decisions are made by committees that include both donors and representatives from the community.

Red Umbrella Fund is a collaborative of sex workers and donors. Grant decisions are made by an International Steering Committee, two-thirds of which consist of sex workers. These decisions are supported by a Program Advisory Committee, 80% of which are sex workers.

UHAI-EASRI is an indigenous activist fund, providing resources to sex workers and sexual and gender minorities in East Africa. Many of their grants are made in an open and competitive process in which the applications are reviewed by a committee of activists drawn from their respective communities. UHAI-EASRI also has two other non-competitive funds. Together, these funds represent the beginning of a new nexus in the donor-activist partnership in which the future of funding is reconstructive, and led by, the constituencies it seeks to serve. By funding young voices, these donors support the building of feminist futures by including the younger voices that will be at the forefront.

Source: http://firecrackerfashion.blogspot.com/2011/02/when-matt-met-millie-intimate-interview.html

CLOSING PERFORMANCE

Burlesque by Millie Dollar and Edward Muir

I first met Harriet Gould aka Millie Dollar in 2006 when we shot a burlesque story. She was studying for an arts degree with a mutual friend, but her paintings of bygone burlesque icons and her idols Betty Paige and Jane Mansfield didn’t impress her tutors. Then during a trip to LA and the opportunity to perform amongst the greats, she decided to cut her losses to pursue the ‘dream.’

You’ve been performing for over five years, how did it all start? I’ve been practicing in my bedroom mirror since I was young, in the style of old musicals that my mother and I used to watch. I never imagined what it would develop into. When I found out there was a whole scene, I was really excited. I thought, hey! It wasn’t just me that [was] practicing strip tease in my bedroom at the age of twelve.

Where does the name come from? Jonny Dollar, the 40s spy drama, referenced in the Marilyn Monroe film The Seven Year Itch was the first part of my name. But what would go with Dollar? Then it hit me, Millie, short for million. Finding out my granddad’s headstrong sister was also called Millie and my burlesque idol shared my real name was a calling. How else could I take this?

Are Millie and Harrie the same person? Not at all, but one girl blamed her alter ego for throwing pint glasses and cigarettes at the audience. You can’t do this. An alter ego is still part of your own personality. Millie is more confident, it’s not something to hide behind, but it’s a confidence I wish I could always have. I’m quite shy really.

Who are your idols? The graceful 20s star Sally Rand, and the raunchy 50s star Zorita – she was so wild. Zorita performed with snakes, but one day a snake pissed on her. Instead of toilet training them, she taped them up. Unfortunately, she kept them taped up for so long they often died. She was obviously controversial and a renowned lesbian, rumored to have a relationship with Marlene Dietrich. She was such an entertaining character.

How would you compare yourself to them? I started performing with classic burlesque like Sally Rand’s feather and balloon dance. That involves dancing inside a giant inflated balloon, quite a feat. However burlesque gets very bitty and I kept finding my balloon slashed before I was about to go on stage. Now I perform to songs like Ram Jam’s Black Betty, which is from the 70s but very modern for me.

Burlesque put simply is stripping, do you think there’s a difference? There is this infamous list that’s been written, by a burlesque performer I worked with only last week – Jo Boobs. She lists the reasons why burlesque is different to stripping or lap dancing. Firstly burlesque is for the audience, stripping is one-on-one. With burlesque you think about the full article or routine, [with] lap dancing you would be thinking about, well, just making tips. They make a lot more money than we do.

Where has burlesque taken you? Geneva, Paris, Zurich, Milan, Croatia, Amsterdam… The best was LA. It was life changing. Apart from learning from the best and developing my act, it made me realize I wasn’t missing my boyfriend. I could see my future. Unfortunately, that wasn’t with him anymore.

Tell me about your parents and upbringing. I wasn’t missing my boyfriend. I was about to go on stage. Now I’m quite passionate about the church. My mum now runs DADA, the disabled arts festival. She’s seen me perform, unlike my dad who’s coming to the next Martini Lounge.

That will be interesting.

Source: http://firecrackerfashion.blogspot.com/2011/02/when-matt-met-millie-intimate-interview.html

Millie Dollar is Liverpool’s supreme burlesque danger. With a mix of rock and roll, sleaze and a wink and smile she will entertain and tease to your heart’s content!

An interview of Millie by Matt Ford
Arunthathi Roy is a writer who was born in the tea plantations of North East India and grew up in Kerala. She studied architecture and urban planning at the Delhi School of Architecture. She wrote two screenplays for films directed by Pradip Krishen: In Which Annie Gives It Those Ones, 1999, which won the National Award for Best Screenplay and Electric Moon, 1993.

Her first novel The God of Small Things, published in 1997, won the Booker Prize and has been translated into 42 languages. Her second novel, The Ministry of Utmost Happiness, written over ten years, was published in 2017. In the 20 years that lay between her two works of fiction, Arundhati Roy authored more than 50 non-fiction pieces. Her first major essay, The End of Imagination, was written in 1998 as a response to the nuclear tests conducted by the Indian government. In that essay, she cautions: “If there is a nuclear war, our foes will not be China or America or even each other. Our foe will be the earth herself. The very elements – the sky, the air, the land, the wind and water – will all turn against us. Their wrath will be terrible. Our cities and forests, our fields and villages will burn for days. Rivers will turn to poison. The air will become fire.”

Rigorously researched and persuasively argued, Roy’s essays cover a vast terrain of issues – capitalism, imperialism, the war on terror, social and environmental justice, India’s caste system, and most importantly, resistance. Her book-length essay The Doctor and the Saint is a deep and provocative engagement with the Ambedkar-Gandhi debate. Her many anthologies of essays include The Algebra of Infinite Justice (2001), An Ordinary Person’s Guide to Empire (2005), Listening to Grasshoppers (2009) and Broken Republic (2011). Taken together, Roy’s essays are a reckoning with the promises of democracy in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

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In that setting, Anjum would ordinarily have been in some danger. But her desolation protected her. Unleashed at last from social protocol, it rose up around her in all its majesty—a fort, with ramparts, turrets, hidden dungeons and walls that hummed like an approaching mob. She rattled through its gilded chambers like a fugitive absconding from herself. She tried to dismiss the cortège of saffron men with saffron smiles who pursued her with infants impaled on their saffron tridents, but they would not be dismissed.

The sea was black, the spume vomit green. Fish fed on shattered glass. Night’s elbows rested on the water, and falling stars glanced off its brittle shards. Moths lit up the sky. He left no footprints in sand, no ripples in water, no image in mirrors.

Sometimes I need to write to think. So I wrote it down for her on a paper napkin. This is what I wrote: To love. To be loved. To never forget your own insignificance. To never get used to the unspeakable violence and the vulgar disparity of life around you. To seek joy in the saddest places. To pursue beauty to its lair. To never simplify what is simple. To respect what is complicated or complicate it lair. To never simplify what is simple. To respect what is complicated or complicate it. To never forget your own insignificance. To never power. To love. To be loved. To never.

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