

We Rise Episode 2: In Dialogue with Alice Walker & Arundhati Roy

Podcast Transcript

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CAT/HOST: Good afternoon everyone and welcome to We Rise on 89.3 FM KPFB in Berkeley, or occupied Ohlone territory known as Huichin. Every week We Rise seeks to bring you an hour of radio to inspire collective liberation through nourishing our imaginations. This week you are in the incredible hands of Arundhati Roy and Alice Walker and two incredible guests with a rebroadcast, a Full Circle brought to you by members of KPFA's First Voice Apprenticeship Program. Without further ado, We Rise.

[Full Circle intro song]

CAT/HOST: Good evening everyone and welcome to Full Circle, your cultural affairs radio magazine produced by members of the First Voice Apprenticeship Program. The show is written, produced and recorded in Huichin, occupied Ohlone territory also known to settlers as the Bay Area. We have such a treat in store for you tonight. We will be airing exclusive segments from City Arts & Lectures June evening with Arundhati Roy and Alice Walker. And I have instudio with me, two very special guests whose lives and work are uniquely intertwined with Alice and Arundhati's. On tonight's show, we'll listen to Arundhati Roy reading from her latest novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, we will hear Alice Walker and Arundhati Roy in dialogue, and my guests and I will discuss the significance of Alice and Arundhati's incendiary insights and prose today. All that tonight on Full Circle. I'm your host, Cat Petru. Please stay with us.

[Full Circle theme music fades out]

CAT/HOST: Good evening everyone and welcome again to Full Circle. I am thrilled to have the opportunity to share with you segments from City Arts and Lectures evening with Alice Walker and Arundhati Roy. For those of you less familiar with these two luminaries, Arundhati Roy is a writer from the Indian subcontinent whose words simultaneously illuminate what is possible when we set our imaginations free, and call into stark accountability the lethal actions of giant world corporations and their government accomplices. Alice Walker, renowned for her novel *The Color Purple*, is a living legend of resistance, resilience and love turned literary then unleashed back out to the people! She is a cherished voice of freedom for oppressed beings on this continent. There is a lot to be learned from these two writers and you are in exceptional hands with my two guests, Arisika Razak and Hemal Lalabhai. Arisika is a professor of Women's Spirituality at the California Institute for Integral Studies in San Francisco, and a teacher at the East Bay Meditation Center. She sat in women's counsel with Alice Walker. And Hemal is a former African game ranger and environmental engineer turned into a writer who focuses on cross-cultural identities and environmental issues. He is currently working on a novel about the Rhodesian civil war and the role that Indian families played in gaining freedom from colonial power. It is such a pleasure to have you both in studio today. Thank you for being here. Would you please each describe your relationship to Alice Walker or Arundhati Roy or both.

ARISIKA: I think I can start by saying that I was part both of Alice's women's council for 10 years and also a very small Buddhist Sangha with six women of color and Jack Kornfield, and over that time I got to understand the real importance of Alice's work and her identity as an activist. She's been involved with human rights struggle, animal rights struggle, the fight against apartheid, the fight against female genital cutting, then of course the civil rights movement. It was an honor and a privilege to be part of her council for 10 years.

CAT/HOST: Thank You Arisika. And Hemal, how about you?

HEMAL: I came across Roy when I was quite young, probably in high school, and my mother has a really large collection of novels. So it was *The God of Small Things* for me that really started [it] off. I had the pleasure of speaking with her husband as well, who's also an environmentalist and a tree specialist in Delhi. Spent quite some time with him in the forests and parks of Delhi doing a lot of tree mapping and tree identification in 2010. But more specifically, my favorite work of Roy is actually her first screenplay she ever wrote called *In Which Annie Gives It Her All*. It's about a bunch of stoners in India in the sixties who are architectural students who really are challenging the status quo, and who really want to change what India will look like in the future. She wrote it in '84 and it's probably something I read at least twice a year. You should have seen her face when I brought it out for her to sign at the reading.

CAT/HOST: Oh what was it? Can you describe it?

Hemal: Her eyes popped out of her head. And then she went, "Wow! This book."

[laughter]

ARISKA: And I want to say that I've taught *God of Small Things* and have paired it sometimes with *Stone Butch Blues* in a segment about transgressive love, loving beyond the borders. And it's always been wonderful for the students.

CAT/HOST: And who writes *Stone Butch Blues*?

ARISKA: Leslie Feinberg

CAT/HOST: Thank you so much. Let's now turn to our first segment from the night. Here is Arundhati Roy reading from her latest novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* this past June in San Francisco.

[Arundhati Roy]

So it's not an easy novel really to read parts of because so much of it is interconnected. But I'll just read a few pages from somewhere in the middle and then we can talk about it later. So this chapter is called "The Tenant" and the woman in the chapter has just come home after having kidnapped a baby, stolen a baby that appeared on the pavement in a place called Jantar Mantar in Delhi which is where all the resistance movements and all the nutjobs and idealists and communists and everyone, all of us, basically, hang out.

[laughter]

And a baby suddenly appears on the pavement next to the cash mizee mothers of the disappeared who don't really know what to do with the baby that has appeared. And eventually after a lot of conversation the police arrive and Tilottama, the woman I'm going to read to you about, basically picks up the baby and runs off with her. So the chapter begins with a quote from Jean Genet which says: "Then as she had already died four or five times, the apartment had remained available for a drama more serious than her own death." The spotted owlet on the street light ducked and bobbed with the delicacy and immaculate manners of a Japanese businessman. He had an unobstructed view through the window of the small bare room and the odd bare woman on the bed. She had an unobstructed view of him too. Some nights she bobbed back and said "Moshi Moshi" which was all the Japanese she knew. Even indoors the walls radiated a bullying, unyielding heat. The slow ceiling fan stirred the

scorched air, layering it with fine cindery dust. The room showed signs of celebration. The balloons tied to the window grill bumped into each other, desultorily softened and shriveled by the heat. In the centre on a low painted stool was a cake with bright strawberry icing and sugar flowers, a candle with a charred wick, a matchbox, and a few used matchsticks. On the cake it said happy birthday Miss Jebeen. The cake had been cut, a small piece eaten, the icing had melted and dribbled onto the silver foil covered cardboard cake base. Ants were making off with crumbs larger than themselves. Black ants. Pink crumbs. The baby, whose birthday and baptism ceremonies had been simultaneously celebrated and successfully concluded, was fast asleep. Her kidnapper, who went by the name of S. Tilottama, was awake and concentrating. She could hear her hair growing. It sounded like something crumbling, a burnt thing crumbling. Coal. Toast. Moths crisped on a lightbulb. She remembered reading somewhere that even after people died their hair and nails kept growing, like starlight traveling through the universe long after the stars themselves had died. Like cities, fizzy, effervescent, simulating the illusion of life while the planet they had plundered died around them. She thought of the city at night, of cities at night, discarded constellations of old stars fallen from the sky, rearranged on earth in patterns and pathways and towers, invaded by weevils that have learned to walk upright. A weevil philosopher with a grave manner and a sharp moustache was teaching a class, reading aloud from a book, admiring young weevils strained to catch each word that spilled from his wise weevil lips. Nietzsche believed that if pity were to become the core of ethics, misery would become contagious and happiness an object of suspicion. The youngsters scratched away on their little notepads. Schopenhauer on the other hand, believed that pity is and ought to be the supreme weevil virtue. But long before them, Socrates asked the key question: why should we be moral? He had lost a leg in Weevil World War IV, this professor, and carried a cane. His remaining five legs were in excellent condition. Airbrush graffiti

sprayed on the back wall of his classroom said “Evil weevils always make the cut.” Other creatures crowded into the already crowded classroom: an alligator with a human skin purse, a grasshopper with good intentions, a fish on a fast, a fox with a flag, a maggot with a manifesto, a neocon newt, an icon iguana, a communist cow, an owl with an alternative, a lizard on TV: *Hello and welcome! You're watching Lizard News at nine. There's been a blizzard on Lizard Island.* The baby was the beginning of something, this much the kidnapper knew. Her bones had whispered this to her that night, the sad night, the concerned night, the aforementioned night, the night hereinafter referred to as *the* night when she made her move on the pavement, and her bones were nothing if not reliable informants. The baby was Miss Jebeen returned. Returned, that is, not to her – Miss Jebeen the first was never hers – but to the world. Miss Jebeen the second, when she was grown to be a lady, would settle accounts and square the books, Miss Jebeen would turn the tide. There was hope yet for the evil weevil world. Naga asked Tilo for one good reason why she was leaving him. Did he not love her? Had he not been caring, considerate, generous, understanding? Why now after all these years? He said fourteen years was enough time for anyone to get over anything, provided they wanted to get over it. People had been through much worse. “Oh that,” she said, “I got over all that long ago. I'm happy and well-adjusted now, like the people of Kashmir. I've learned to love my country. I may even vote in the next elections.” He let that pass. He said she should think about seeing a psychiatrist. Thinking made her throat ache. That was a good reason not to think about seeing a psychiatrist. Naga had started wearing tweed coats and smoking cigars, like his father did, and talking to servants in the imperious way that his mother did. Termites on toast, cardioloincloths and the Rolling Stones are a forgotten fever dream from a past life. Naga's mother who lived alone on the ground floor of the big house, his father, ambassador Shiv Shankar Hariharan, had died, advised him to let Tilo go, “She won't be able to manage on her own, she'll beg you to

take her back.” Naga knew otherwise. Tilo would manage, and even if she didn't there would be no begging. He sensed she was drifting on a tide that neither he nor she could do much about. He couldn't tell whether her restlessness, her compulsive and increasingly unsafe wandering through the city, marked the onset of an unsoundness of mind or an acute perilous kind of sanity. Or were they both the same thing? The only thing he could attribute her newfound restiveness to was her mother's bizarre passing, which he thought odd, given that it was a relationship that had barely existed. True, Tilo had been at her bedside during the last two weeks in hospital, but other than that she had seen her mother only a few times in the past several years. Naga was right in one sense but wrong in another. Her mother's death had released Tilo from an internment that nobody, including she herself, had been aware of because it had passed itself off as something quite the opposite: her peculiar insular independence. For all of her adult life, Tilo had defined and shaped herself by marking off and maintaining a distance between herself and her mother, her real foster mother. When that was no longer necessary something frozen began to thaw and something unfamiliar began to take its place. Naga's pursuit of Tilo had not turned out as planned. She was meant to be just another easy conquest, yet another woman who had succumbed to his irreverent brilliance and edgy charm and had her heart broken. But Tilo had crept up on him and become a kind of compulsion, an addiction almost. Addiction has its own mnemonics: skin, smell, the length of the loved one's fingers. In Tilo's case it was the slant of her eyes, the shape of her mouth, the almost invisible scar that slightly altered the symmetry of her lips and made her look defiant even when she did not mean to, the way her nostrils flared announcing her displeasure even before her eyes did, the way she held her shoulders, the way she sat on a pot stark naked and smoked cigarettes. So many years of marriage, the fact that she was not young anymore and did nothing to pretend otherwise, didn't change the way he felt because it had to do with more than all that. It was the

haughtiness, despite this question mark over her stock, as his mother had not hesitated to put it. It had to do with the way she lived, in the country of her own skin, a country that issued no visas, and seemed to have no consulates. True, it had never been a particularly friendly country, even at the best of times, but its borders were sealed and the regime of more or less complete isolationism began only after the train wreck at the Shiraz Cinema. Naga married Tilo because he was never really able to reach her, and because he couldn't reach her he couldn't let her go. Of course that raises another question: why did Tilo marry Naga? A generous person would say it was because she needed shelter. A less generous view would be that it was because she needed cover. Although his was only a small part in the story, in Naga's mind before and after Shiraz sometimes took on the overtones of BC and AD.

Thank you.

[Applause]

CAT/HOST: You are listening to Full Circle on 94.1 FM KPFA in Berkeley, and that was Arundhati Roy reading a segment of her latest novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. I'm your host Cat Petru, and I'm sitting here with Arisaka Razak and Hemal Lalabhai, my guests for this evening, educator and writer alike. And I am aching to hear their responses to Arundhati's reading. Who would like to begin?

ARISAKA: I think that in the passage that was read, which really does come from the center of the novel, we see some of the techniques of moving back and forth in time, highlighting the human story, highlighting the roles of animals, the questions of morality, death, birth, rebirth, all of these questions. At the back of the book there's a comment: "How do you tell a shattered story? By slowly becoming everybody? No, by slowly becoming everything." And in the passage that we've just heard, we hear – not so much a foreshadowing – but a way that

the themes of belonging, protection, security, the colonization by the British, the issues of philosophy that are played out in such embodied and discomforting ways in the book, are all spoken to. The weevils that she mentioned, these insects, the characterization of people as animals, the minuscule in which some of the characters are spoken to, the flight of crows, the kidnapping of a child, the love of mothers and the lack of love of mothers, all these themes weave through the personal story, the impersonal story. The way Alice said at one point, that this was a book that had to be read at least twice, and I totally agree with her. But I love the way that Arundhati picked this passage, which brings together so many of the themes.

HEMAL: Yeah I think you spoke beautifully about this. It really shows interconnectedness that is India: the disarray, the violence, the tenderness, the fragility. The passage, for me specifically, also kind of relinquishes accountability and also picks it up towards the end. Just that ongoing unfamiliarness that is touching everyone, but also is everyone. And for most part it also really speaks to me about how I, too, have witnessed India, and it makes me really feel through this passage and through her reading that there's such a deeper connection that really goes beyond all of us and even goes beyond being human. I think one of my favorite things she mentions – and it comes out like a punch – is when she says “the crocodile with the human skin bag.” She really has this efficacy in which she is trying to still act as activist in her writing, and really getting you to think deeper into what these passages read between the lines, to see past the child and then the lover and then also see through them and then recognizing them.

ARISKA: I think there's also a way that, while there is great violence in this novel, and while love is not always safe, rewarded, that the verities – the eternal human verities of love – our need for love, our need for love as children, our need for love as adults, the way in which we barter our bodies for safety, the way in which we still hold onto the contents of our minds and psyches, in spite

of, regardless – as Alice says in another passage – is also very present there. The ways that this novel, which is against the backdrop of so many contemporary changes, the modernization, the globalization, the issues of caste and class, the invisibility of harm done to those of lower caste, the invisibility and at the same time the total visibility of violence done against women, other humans, against animals, the invocation of the sacredness of animal life and the total disrespect of that by everybody. This is a novel – for me as an outsider to Indian culture – about so many contradictions in India which are only echoed by the contradictions we have as we live here in the U.S. Living in this place that is at one level so rich and has an equal disregard for the lives of those that are marginalized and oppressed.

HEMAL: Yeah, there's a real strong essence in the beginning of this passage of longing to return. I think she really speaks to it going on as well, what the sense of longing in return is, is for me, perhaps in India in which there is a bridge to the spiritual region of itself, but through a globalization and now industrialization, that bridge is collapsing underneath our feet. And, you said beautifully again that, you know, even in this country we still try to connect or rebuild those bridges, even being so far removed from our own cultures, but these cultures in which these spiritual practices and beliefs are really harbored are now being very threatened.

CAT: Mhm. There are so many themes that you both speak to, and thank you for everything you shared. It's incredibly moving to hear you both speak to these themes and to hear her reading this work at a time when we've just had these hurricanes and these fires and the repeal of DACA and just all these things that in this – to give more terms to what you just spoke to, you know – globalized capitalism, British, U.S. all these empires that frankly, I perceive to be on the verge of collapse, all of these systems that from the beginning were not centering any life other than human and not centering any life other than, you know, European white men etc etc etc, and Toni Cade Bambara has this quote:

“The role of the artist is to make – or the role of the writer – is to make the revolution irresistible.” And I just think she does that so beautifully and she has work that's much more explicitly political, but in her fiction – I mean the phrase like “thinking made her throat ache” – there's so much in that! And the way she “lived in the country of her own skin,” writing about this main character. If either of you want to speak to any of that, or elaborate, that would be wonderful.

HEMAL: Yeah I would love to speak to it. That line really does get me, I actually even quoted it as we heard it, but “the country of her own skin” – and, you know, as a man I gotta be careful about saying these things as well – but to be honoring all women and everything they've been through especially Roy as an activist has been in prison multiple times in the past couple decades. She's very much spoken to her role as activist and not as writer. A lot of people have given her the title writer-activist and she speaks quite powerfully to it in *Power and Politics*, where people in stores, you know they ask her whether or not they can display her work and she's like it's not for display like a pair of earrings, it's way beyond it. And this book also gets deeper into that.

ARISKA: I think also for me, “the country of one's skin” speaks to the heroes and at one point she speaks of them – it's not in this passage but that they contained all the fractured warring selves in India so this group of people that may or may not be masculine that is what in the U.S. we would call third gender – she sets up a community in which they are Muslim, they are Christian, they are Hindu. Some of them want to be identified as male who are what we would term cross-dressing. This is a community of people that has existed for a long long long time in India and who served ritual and spiritual purposes and also are in modern India involved in what we would call sex work, the sex trade, and this issue of what is it to be comfortable in our own skin. And I think that's something that certainly comes up with trans people today, with people who are gender fluid, this questioning of: what is my own skin? What is underneath that skin? There's a lot in this book about color and caste and as an

African-American woman in the U.S. this is such an issue. We are a nation that was founded on issues of white and non-white in terms of where you could live, whether you could own your own body, what roles you could take on in society, who you could marry. You know, I just was reading something this morning that no Chinese or black people were allowed in the entire state of Oregon. It was not only a sundown county but a sundown state.

CAT/HOST: Yeah, the issue of self-determination is one thing I hear you speak to and indeed the roots of this nation. Thank you both for sharing what you did. Let's turn now to Alice Walker and Arundhati Roy discussing the caste system in India and colonialism more broadly.

[Alice Walker]

Okay, now I read all of your books, novels and everything else. And the most recent everything else was this book called "The Doctor in the Saint" and I learned so much about the caste system in India that I didn't know. And I think for many people in this country it would be very good to have more of an understanding, not just of the position of Gandhi, and – how do you pronounce it?

[Arundhati Roy]

Ambedkar.

[Alice Walker]

Ambedkar. But just how it is, it is carried through to today, you know, and what that means for your country and what we can learn from it in our country. I think for many African Americans and other people of color here, there's a feeling sometimes of just going around in a circle and coming

back to the same disasters, you know, because the racism like the caste system is just embedded in the culture itself and apparently in people's psyches. So if there is anything that you would like to say to us about this horribly entrenched system in India that's so old and the ways in which people try to change it, that would be very helpful and useful I think.

[Arundhati Roy]

Well you know, the caste system I would say is one of the most ancient institutionalized systems of social hierarchy that the human race has discovered, and it is incredible to me that it has more or less passed under the radar, you know, because Hinduism and yoga and Gandhi and, you know, all this has somehow managed to put a sort of mystical curtain around it. Whereas actually it is a cruel system of hierarchy which has only been entrenched and modernized in India today. It is the engine that runs Indian society, and the only time it surfaces in sort of somewhat honest way is just before elections when all TV channels are doing these caste calculations, right, about which caste will vote for whom and how it's going to work. But it's to me like whether it's academics whether it's literature whether it's indology, whatever it is, you know, to ignore caste is like writing about apartheid South Africa or pre-Civil Rights America without noticing apartheid. If you just look at even the castes of who are the industrialists, who are the editors of newspapers, who are the owners of newspapers, who are the traders, all of it is very much within the purview of caste. And of course we are a society that has invented the idea that a human being can be considered untouchable, and that practice continues today in India. Almost every day you're reading the papers about Muslims or Dalits being lynched, being killed by mobs, not by police necessarily, while police watch sometimes, but we are in a terrifying situation right now. I mean, obviously the Ministry of Utmost Happiness as well as the God of Small Things both do have caste at the center of the story.

[Alice Walker]

Part of what I really appreciate about your work is that you will name names and you will show us the corporations that are behind atrocities in society. And you will show us the greedy people who are oppressing and destroying so many of the people who have nothing. I have always admired your work with the indigenous people and against the mining and the damming of rivers and wiping out of neighborhoods and societies and cultures.

[Arundhati Roy]

It's become so, it's become so complicated now, you know, in the way we were just talking about it backstage about how, for example: the other day somebody asked me a question, she said she was working on post-colonial something. I said, are you sure colonialism is post –

[Alice Walker]

No, not post.

[Arundhati Roy]

– because i'm not so sure about that.

[applause]

And in country, a country like India where it is trying to step onto the global stage as a global economic superpower, whereas it did not have and has not had the colonies that other countries had while they were industrializing all slaves like this country had, so it's sort of colonizing itself. And right now – I mean there hasn't been a day since 1947 when India became independent that the Indian Army has not been deployed

against “its own people”, you know, not a day. But now the battle is in, I mean one of the battles is within central India in the forested areas where mostly people, by indigenous people, and it has been signed over to - it's an old story of course – signed over to mining corporations and infrastructure companies. And the forest is flooded with paramilitary burning, raping; vigilante groups have been created, and they want to drive the population out to hand over to the mining companies. And yet these mining companies, many of them will be the main sponsors of film festivals, literary festivals, and you know writers will be flying in and speaking about free speech while in the forest this is going on.

[Alice Walker]

And really, if you were not, you know, reminding everybody how this works, people would be blissfully ignorant.

[Arundhati Roy]

I mean, in India there's a lot of people who are very aware of this and there's a lot of anger about it and about how it all works. Not just them, you know, but the whole system of how these big generous foundations and NGOs and how the whole thing works to defuse the rage.

CAT/HOST: Welcome back to full circle on 94.1 FM KPFA. You just heard the voices of Alice Walker and Arundhati Roy discussing India's caste system and the violence of ongoing colonialism and globalized capitalism. My guests, Arisika Razak and Hemal Lalabhai, are writers in their own right fighting tyrannies of oppression and embodying the spirit of memory and renewal. What does this dialogue bring up for each of you?

HEMAL: Wow! So growing up in a Hindu family, you're told a lot of things and a lot of it usually has to do with marriage when you're a young male, especially a young boy. And my parents for the longest time said you have to marry

someone of our caste. She has to be from our village, she has to be from our community. As someone who's never dated an Indian woman my whole life, I could tell you it's been a really long fight for me at home. But you know caste is really at the heart of what Hinduism is, because in the makeup of Hinduism, Brahma is this being with four different, five different parts, and each part of Brahma is a different caste. So this inequality, this institutionalized way of racism, inner racism, is really at also the heart of our spirituality and also our culture. And it's not a right one, it's one that I've never believed my whole life. It's something that my parents and grandparents still believe. There may be young men of my age who still believe it as well, but from my experiences in India in the past, you know, twenty years is that I've seen a lot of work being done in that country to really uproot that. There's a lot of really great activism happening and a lot of great artwork being controlled too as well. You know there's a lot of grassroot movements happening as well. Her name's escaping me right now but if I continue to talk about it I know it might pop-up – Vandana Shiva.

CAT/HOST: Ah, yes. Of course. Vandana Shiva.

HEMEL: Exactly. There are absolutely things happening there in India. What she speaks to, she says there are people who know about these things, they are people who are doing a lot to change it. And for me it took quite some time to want to change it, to speak about it. I think as an American Indian and also saw the sub-saharan African, I wear a lot of hats and I've had to go back to India to find that maybe that hat didn't fit and then I went back to Africa to find if that hat fit – it didn't fit either. So I'm back here and I'm working with all those hats, I have to really talk about the history of the caste system, of the racism that exists within families if not different parts within India, and also the ability to get past those walls, to break those walls down.

CAT/HOST: Thank you for your courage and tenacity in speaking to that and in doing that tremendous work. Ariskia, what would you like to share?

ARISKA: You know, I think that as I listened to that passage I really understood in a deeper way Alice's resonance with the whole question of caste. I too had read Arundhati Roy's *The Doctor and The Saint*, and it brought up for me some really really uncomfortable truths, certainly as someone who worked with the civil rights movement. I had known that Dr. King's work had been inspired by Gandhi's work, and then to read a book that took the halo off and really showed I had read some other things. There's a book, *Leaving India My Family's Journey to Five Continents* that talks about some of the racism that Gandhi exhibited when he was in South Africa toward the indigenous black people of South Africa. And I didn't know or understand so much about caste – some of it does come up, in fact it's very central to *The God of Small Things* – and that the treatment of lower caste people very much paralleled the treatment of American blacks in the South during the era after the Civil War and up through the modern civil rights movement. So to read about the complexity of that and how Gandhi essentially betrayed the Dalits, and to read about a country where you know you could be killed for crossing the path of someone of the upper caste. I had gone to the Beijing conference and heard testimony, this is in 1995, by Dalit women a story of a Dalit woman being raped in the temple and the villagers were upset not because she'd been raped but because a Dalit woman in the temple pollutes the temple. Her rape was of no consequence. And to read about the villages that Gandhi extolled as a model for democracy and to read the brutality with which Dalits were treated, that in fact the enforcement of the marginalization so that if the Dalits were seen as being too uppity, you know, going for something, a position a job, having money, that they could be not only killed but viciously killed, castrated, dismembered. People asked to rape their mothers and when they did not do that, having them tortured, dismembered violently in front of the parents. Some of the ways that Dalits were treated resonate with me as an African-American woman who thinks of Emmett Till, who thinks of the lynchings, who thinks of the viciousness. Arundhati Roy says at one point “how do you keep people laboring in a way where they are being starved and maltreated.” It has to be about terrorization and that, you know, as a

person of color who had read some of the narratives of India becoming a world power and feeling happy that all power was not in the hands of Europe again, to read this is so saddening, such a betrayal of our essential humanity

CAT/HOST: Absolutely so you both, you're getting into actually what our next segment speaks to. So at the beginning of Alice Walker's question she brought up one of Arundhati Roy's essays called The Doctor and The Saint what Arisika Razak just spoke to. So let's listen to the two of them, Alice Walker and Arundhati Roy, follow up on this surprising and important disruption of our commonly held beliefs about Gandhi and its implications for the non-violence movement in this country.

[Arundhati Roy]

Alice, when you're here on the stage I do want to say this, that you read The Doctor and The Saint, and to me it was painful to write that, you know, and, and I mean after having written that it was very disturbing how much the African-American community reviews Gandhi. Whereas, really you know in the story of Gandhi in South Africa that is put out is a false one and The Doctor and The Saint is not me interpreting anything, it's just a reproduction of his letters, his articles and the things he said. For example, all of us are taught in school that Gandhi went to South Africa and you know he was sitting on a train in the whites only compartment and he was thrown off the train and he became politicized and started to work against the inequality against Africans there. But I mean of course in India a lot of people who have borne the brunt of caste like Ambedkar, who was an outcast and untouchable but to my mind the greatest modern intellectual in India, didn't have to go to South Africa to experience that.

[Alice Walker]

Exactly.

[Arundhati Roy]

But the story that I wanted to say, in fact Gandhi's first victory in South Africa was when he arrived in Durban he fought for a third entrance to the Durban post office because he didn't believe Indians and blacks should share the same entrance. And then there's a whole – I mean there's no time to get into it – but there's a lot of, it's a very saddening story to read from his attitude towards Africans and his attitude towards caste which was, he often said it was the genius of Hindu civilization. He did not believe in untouchability, he did not believe in the practice of untouchability.

[Alice Walker]

Well for me reading that was extremely painful because of course I am someone who is very deeply involved in the Civil Rights movement in Mississippi, especially, and loved Martin Luther King very much, and wonder how much of this he understood. But I think what saves Gandhi, for me, is a Buddhist perspective which is that we start in places that we understand from what we were taught and then we struggle – some of us forever – to reach a different and higher perspective. And unfortunately I'm not sure he got very far, you know, that was disappointing. But I think he did get, get away from where he started.

[Arundhati Roy]

The thing is that you know human beings are complicated and a lot of what is in *The Doctor and The Saint* is Gandhi's own writings, you know. But what is actually disappointing is following that, there's been a falsification of the legacy, you know. And the thing is it's not that he was all bad. Today, if you look at the situation of communalism, you know he died because of the position that he took, repeating that India was not a

Hindu nation, and he was killed by Hindu right-wing fundamentalist people who think like them, like the assassins of Gandhi are in power now, you know.

[Alice Walker]

But Ambedkar, the person who we should have known about and we don't know about, this is a major thing you've given us. It's a beautiful gift and I thank you very deeply.

[Arundhati Roy]

Yeah, he was, he is somebody who must be read and must be known.

[Alice Walker]

Yeah, absolutely. You know I had no idea that such a person existed. And he's so much more like us really, traditionally and historically, people of color, black people, and untouchable who somehow you know in school they put him on a little mat separate from the other children. He somehow became a lawyer. He still – he go away to Europe into America or wherever.

[Arundhati Roy]

If you go to the poorest houses in India, the poorest homes, usually the homes of Dalit people, you will never find a picture of Gandhi. You will always find a picture of Ambedkar.

[Alice Walker]

Really?

[Arundhati Roy]

Yeah.

[Alice Walker]

Oh, I'm so happy to hear that.

[Arundhati Roy]

Yeah so –

[Alice Walker]

That's wonderful.

[Arundhati Roy]

Gandhi is the saint of the status quo.

[Alice Walker]

Yeah, that's wonderful. That's very good. Wow.

[applause]

CAT/HOST: This is full circle on KPFA 94.1 FM and that was Arundhati Roy and Alice Walker discussing the truth about beloved champion for peace and justice, Mohandas K Gandhi. I am speaking with Arisika Razak who sat in women's counsel with Alice Walker and Hemal Lalabhai, an American-born writer of Indian ancestry who grew up in South Africa and Orange County. When I first heard this discussion I was not totally surprised as I've heard critiques of Gandhi before, but it's a pretty big deal. How important is this historical revision to each of you individually and to your communities?

ARISKA: I think it's really important that we understand that those who inspire us are also human. I think Alice speaks to that, that we come, according to what she just said about Buddhist belief, we come into a certain place and then we have the rest of our lives. I too had read some of the critiques of Gandhi. One of my dissertation students actually came up with a quote in which he said that he did not believe that a virtuous woman could be raped, that even if someone came into the presence of a woman with bad intention, the radiance of her virtue would repel them. It sounds like some very conservative beliefs that we've heard thrown about women in this country. So I had heard some of that. I think there's always a human tendency to want to take someone and put them on pedestals, and I love the notion I know Sweet Honey (Sweet Honey in the Rock) – I don't know the origin of this saying – but we're the ones that we've been waiting for, that we need to look into our hearts as human beings and see what are the collective values that are most important to it, that we need to put those at the forefront. Having lived through the assassination of Malcolm X who I grew up listening to here on street corners, having lived through the assassination of Martin Luther King, having witnessed the decimation of the Panthers for all the good and bad that they did, both are there, that we need to acknowledge where our leaders are wrong. Alice has a habit of finding the hidden and bringing them to light. She almost single-handedly resurrected the career of Zora Neale Hurston who was a fantastic writer, anthropologist person whose work had been just ignored by male literary canon, black male literary canon people. And so I think the importance of Ambedkar and his critique and where we look at, where do we make compromises, and where are those compromises harmful to the least in the community. Where are they harmful to those to whom society is already doing the most harm, and how do we look past our own privilege. You know when I think about the issue of cultural humility which says that we are in this lifelong struggle to understand and humbly appreciate all the diversities around us and look at the ways that our privilege blinds us to communities that, you know, as an African-American woman I may be targeted as a woman and targeted because of my racial

identity, but I don't always have that kind of wisdom and knowledge about the disabled community, the transgender community, the sex worker community, and so I think it's really, really important that we hold ourselves up and we hold our leaders up to scrutiny about where are the good things that they did and where are the problematic areas so that we learn from their mistakes and not continue to make them.

HEMAL: Yes, yes, yes, yes! Growing up, Gandhi obviously was a large part of people's vision towards their conversation with me. They'd always ask me how I'd feel about it, and you know I didn't really feel much about it because, one, the issue was always much bigger than Gandhi. Growing up when I was reading about Gandhi, you'd also read about the people next to him. It was always about the people that followed him and the large part of the time they usually held him pretty accountable for his stuff except for a lot of the weird sexual things that he practiced, the methods of abstinence that he had practice which is a large part of what people bring up today when they speak of Gandhi. But they don't ever really talk about how he was a stretcher bear in the Boer War, you know, and that was one of the bloodiest wars in history. And it was after that where he spent time in South Africa to go become a lawyer and then fight the colonial powers that he had once fought for himself. It's pretty unfair in many regards too, because I think you know not even Arundhati Roy can really place herself in the troubled aspect of living as Gandhi, too, and it can create a lot of backlash, I believe. And in her work, she does mention that he did change his view and his own belief of the Dalit people and also the untouchables, but it just took a long time for him to get there. And during that time in which he took to change, a lot of things did not go well. And even after Gandhi, I mean things are not going well, whether it be for Muslims, whether it be for the lower caste or the middle class, the farmers of India, too, who are usually between both realms of those areas. And now we have the whole issue of what's happening to the tribal people of India, and you know that goes beyond caste as well because that's actually lower than the caste system. They're just indigenous people, the

forest. It doesn't really bother me too much, even while I still hold a very large space for Gandhi in my heart, to hear these things, because knowing how politics change rapidly so do our beliefs as well. And if we're not willing to accept change or change our beliefs, then we're not gonna be ready to have these conversations and neither are we going to be able to destroy political parties that won't have us have these conversations.

CAT/HOST: Right thank you both. Before we wrap up, I would love to know if there's anything else from the evening with Alice Walker and Arundhati Roy from Roy's novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* or from our discussion that you want to add to before we stop.

ARISKA: I think that after a second and almost third reading of the novel I really came to understand more about the scope of history, of struggle and of the vast array of players that Arundhati Roy is giving voice to. She's giving voice to the forest people she's giving voice to the people who are fighting for freedom in Kashmir who are being betrayed by other struggling forces that are going fundamentalist in Kashmir. She's giving voice to the struggles of women. She is giving voice to the struggles, the complexity of human beings who one moment are collaborating with injustice and at the next moment are rescuing and supporting someone. I think that we always want to – I say this to my students – we always want things to be simple: right, wrong, good, bad, and humanity is just more complicated than this. And I think, thinking about this, when I heard the talk I really wanted it to be more about the novel. And yet Alice is an activist and Arundhati Roy is an activist, and Arundhati Roy achieved great fame for her first novel and then did not write a novel again I think for almost 18 years, at least over a decade, and this is her second novel. And in between she has worked as an activist and written as an activist. And I think that's the piece that Alice wanted to bring out and that is important to her. And I begin to understand having thought about the book, having gone back to it, I missed hearing a discussion of the *Hijras* because as an outsider to Indian culture I

wanted to have more of that discussion. But I also think that this piece of Ambedkar and the issue of caste and the subtle and not so subtle ways that she talks about in *The Doctor and the Saint* where Gandhi renounced untouchability but did not want to grant to the untouchables to the Dalits as a group, self-representation to bring them in as another pillar and really unflinchingly unwilling to compromise on the fact that they needed to speak for themselves, not be spoken for, not be compromised about, is a really important issue and a lesson I think that we, as we try to make alliances here in the States with a similar array of identity, ethnic, national origin, disabled, sexual orientation, gender, all of these things, all of these groups, that we need to learn from the lessons of history, how even men or women or third gender beings who want to do good can stumble and fall. I think this is an important issue and I really want to encourage, as Alice talked about, that these books be read in tandem, that we look at both the political underpinnings of caste and then the novel which is larger than that issue.

CAT/HOST: Thank you, Arisika.

HEMAL: Thank you. The creativity behind her show in the interconnectedness she shows the hidden pockets of the social webs, the pockets that you really know are there but you never get to experience or even get to see. And you know for me throughout the novel it was such a gift because now when I go return to India I'm going to see it through so many more eyes and more importantly with such an open heart. And it really is a gift to have such an activist in my life as Arundhati Roy be a writer, because that's where I think her real work lays in. And I know she'll continue to do incredible things with it, and for me specifically as well, you know she gives me the ability to check myself and hold myself accountable and do work that can really represent people that do not have a voice. And it's become my sole purpose to help her in her search and her longing to give people the opportunity to hold themselves up as a pillar rather than fight for a foundation to live upon. And just the sheer amount of

creativity again that I can only think about in all of her work, she is such a beautiful mind who really challenges the status quo and she really wants you to really open up everything you can about yourself and of others to really challenge the way we live as a community, as a point in the cosmos, as Earth. She really wants you to really make a difference and you don't get that too often with very contemporary writers. They're really stuck in being sometimes ambiguous, and I take full accountability for that because I love being ambiguous in my work, but there's something really refreshing about reading her all the time and I really hope you know the listeners really give it a shot.

CAT/HOST: Thank you. It has been a huge honor to have you both in studio tonight. Thank you both for being here.

ARISKA: Thank you, Catherine. Thank you for inviting us.

CAT/HOST: My pleasure. That brings us to the end of tonight's show. Please check out our website KPFApprentice.org for links to some of what came up in discussion as well as to my two guests. Our executive producer is Miss M, our technical director is Frank Sterling. Joy Moore is our production consultant. I've been your host, Cat Petru special thanks to Laura on the Ones and Twos and to City Arts & Lectures for sharing this audio with us.