Arundhati Roy addresses important issues such as exclusion on the basis of gender and caste by looking at them from the microscopic level of everyday life rather than the macroscopic level of history. She addresses the lives and issues of powerless common people in two different registers – that of literature and that of activism – in which similar concerns are voiced through different functions of performative language.

**Roy’s rhetoric of the ‘small things’**

In *The God of Small Things*, marginalization is performed through references to ‘small things’. This concept, which becomes very powerful in her writing, is – somewhat paradoxically – borrowed from Jawaharlal Nehru’s self-contradictory nationalist rhetoric. In ‘The Greater Common Good’, an essay against dam-building as a large-scale project which damages the lives of thousands of people in India, Roy refers to Nehru’s main political line regarding the matter:

> In the fifty years since Independence, after Nehru’s famous ‘Dams are the Temples of Modern India’ speech (one that he grew to regret in his own lifetime), his footsoldiers threw themselves into the business of building dams with unnatural fervour. Dam-building grew to be equated with Nation-building.¹

In note 4 to ‘The Greater Common Good’ in *The Cost of Living*, Roy mentions Nehru’s later rephrasing of his own ideology:

In a speech given before the 29th Annual Meeting of the Central Board of Irrigation and Power (17 November 1958) Nehru said, ‘For some time past, however, I have been beginning to think that we are suffering from what we may call ‘the disease of gigantism’. We want to show that we can build big dams and do big things. This is a dangerous outlook developing in India … the idea of big – having big undertakings and doing big things for the sake of showing that we can do big things – is not a good outlook at all.’ And ‘… It is… the small irrigation projects, the small industries and the small plants for electric power, which will change the face of the country far more than half a dozen projects in half a dozen places.’

Roy uses Nehru’s correction to turn the rhetoric of Indian nationalism on its head and to denounce this ‘disease of gigantism’ as a highly flawed concept, based on a false assumption of Indian unity. Whilst India only defined itself as a nation state in contrast to the British occupation, the post-independence totalizing discourses of the nation have tended to sacrifice the interests of common people to the allegedly greater cause of ‘mother India’.

In her essays, Roy is hugely critical of this attitude displayed by the state authorities. Far from acknowledging it as a necessity imposed by the requirements of modernization, she reads in this sacrifice of individuals for the ‘greater common good’ a reflection of the institutionalized prejudice represented by the caste and subcaste system:

A huge percentage of the displaced are Adivasis (57.6 per cent in the case of the Sardar Sarovar dam). Include Dalits and the figure becomes obscene. According to the Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Tribes\(^3\) it’s about 60 per cent. If you consider that Adivasis account for only 8 per cent and Dalits another 15 per cent of India’s population, it opens up a whole other dimension to the story. The ethnic ‘otherness’ of their victims takes some of the pressure off the Nation Builders. It’s like having an expense account. Someone else

\(^2\) Ibid., 104.
\(^3\) Ibid., 106. These ‘poorest people’ are scheduled castes and tribes, i.e. former untouchables according to the official terminology used by the Government of India. In endnote 19 to ‘The Greater Common Good’, Roy refers to GOI, 28th and 29th Report of the Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, New Delhi, 1988-89.