“Arundhati doesn’t have a fig leaf to hide behind”

Wednesday, 01 April 2009
Last Updated Wednesday, 01 April 2009

By: Ru Freeman, USA Arundhati Roy is certainly an iconic presence in the progressive world I inhabit, but I am inherently suspicious of people who make public pronouncements but act differently in private. Her one visit to Sri Lanka - as far as I know (somebody point out if I'm wrong, please, since I'd like to hold her words in reverence a while longer) - was in the aftermath of THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS when she stood on a podium at the British Council (I was there), to scoff at the Booker and talk about how unimportant it was to her. I wonder, did she return the beaucoup bucks? If not, she is no better than Palin talking about refusing federal funds and then taking the hand out. And I say that as someone who, not so long ago, on this very list, defended Roy for selling her books at Costco.

And so on the point of silence; what silence? Here in America at least, the media is awash on a daily basis with howls and cries about genocide, and ongoing protests at the UN and in DC by supporters not of Tamil civilians but of the LTTE. Here is a recent article I wrote re the whole MIA debacle: http://www.commondreams.org/view/2009/02/21-7 (You can also find it by googling common dreams, MIA) I have absolutely no regard for arm-chair pundits who sit about in their comfy Euro-Western homes and write their checks to the LTTE. If they really believed that the LTTE is right, they'd be out there fighting alongside them, not leaving it - and isn't this always the way? - to the poor Tamils trapped in the North to do their dying for them. The IPKF was not welcome in Sri Lanka by anybody - it was a bargain negotiated by the Sri Lankan government under threat from the powers in TN who were putting pressure on the Indian government. The words "peace-keeping" though they were part of the agreement, were a ludicrous misnomer. It stood to reason then that the Premadasa government, taking over from Jayewardene, turned on the Indians as soon as possible, and that the IPKF, temporarily, made every warring faction in Sri Lanka (the JVP, Premadasa and the LTTE), unite. But that is past history. The Indian government is participating now by giving its implicit support to the GOSL to eradicate the LTTE. As in the aftermath of the tsunami, when the people of Sri Lanka managed to do more for each other than the Americans managed to do for the victims of Hurricane Katrina, the government is doing its best to assist the civilians who have lived for the past 25 years under the LTTE. I agree that there has to be a transparent, humanitarian way to deal with people reeling from such misery and who have fled under fire from the LTTE, who have lost their children and other family members to the LTTE. I also know that the reality of life for Tamil civilians in Sri Lanka in the rest of the island is not covered by an over-zealous press quick to file their stories, and not researched by readers of such stories. If you scroll down at this link, http://rufreeman.com/blog/ you can read my post about Global Media where there is a link to a terrific article on foreign reporters. And Arundhati Roy, given all the swaggering she does on the global activist stage, doesn't even have that fig leaf to hide behind.What people who care about Sri Lanka ought to do is to support the government in figuring out a way to provide for the civilians who have escaped from the LTTE-held areas, and, as quickly as possible move them back to their homes. They should also participate in the reconstruction of the North and the rehabilitation of people who bare the psychological scars of decades of abuse and neglect. There are many grievances between the Sinhalese and Tamil - and Muslim - people in Sri Lanka. We can go back and trace every single wrong that was done and we will find that the role of abuser and abused changes as we go along. But that examination is meaningless to people who are living and suffering - on all sides - today. If people truly wanted to help - be it the Indian government, you and me, or those who want to toss around the term "genocide" because its a convenient label to get people fired up, then they should first, familiarize themselves with the entire country and the people who live there (a visit would be great) and then become part of the solution - which is, in the end, peace between all these people, and justice for everybody, both of which also means safety from the threat of terrorism. Ruvani Freeman's debut novel, 'A Disobedient Girl' is being published in the USA and the UK by Simon and Schuster and by Viking in the UK and is coming out in translation in Brazil, the Netherlands, Italy, Malaysia and Thailand. She lives in Philadelphia. She studied briefly at Peradeniya university, but transferred to Bates college, Maine where she majored in International Relations. She later did a Masters at Colombo university in International Labour Relations. She's an activist and a freelance contributor to magazines and writes often to 'common dreams', a webzine.