

BOOK REVIEW

Arundhati Roy, *Listening to Grass Hoppers: Field Notes on Democracy*, London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2009.

Listening to Grass Hoppers is an anthology of field notes dissecting the political system in the second largest secular democracy of the world. Largely a fiction writer, Arundhati Roy's compilation is sensitive to all three levels of a political system: structure, procedure and the spirit of democracy. India has adhered to a bicameral system within the structure. While admirable, this gives it a facade to hide behind. An international currency, the trademark cliché of democracy 'by the people, of the people and for the people' is easily cashed both by international and national politics. The procedure followed to implement democracy through legislature, adult franchise, elections, and the use of media etc. facilitates the space for manipulation. This treatment leaves the lands of nation-states without civilizations. Roy's razor-edged criticism of the free market and its residence in a fractured and discriminated Indian society shows her compassion for reparation. She argues that the spirit of democracy 'for the people' is demonized thereon.

Written with fluid precision, the book relies profoundly on all the three resources of research: primary, secondary and tertiary, to expose the dovetailing of nationalism with fascism, however continuing with a self-sabotaging caste system at some places and religious majoritarianism at another. "The US government used the lies and disinformation generated around the September 11 attacks to invade not just one country, but two, and heaven knows what else is in store. The Indian government uses the same strategy not with other countries but against its own people" (p-26), is a vital concern for Roy who, like anyone else, would be as susceptible to the spirit of a 'for the people' democracy.

The corporate culture and the 'free market' economy in India are illustrated by Roy's picturesque overview of the schism in urban and rural India. The "shops, restaurants, railway stations, airports, gymnasiums, hospitals", in urban India exemplify the notion of 'Shining India' and election promises of able bodies. This phenomenon does not however relate to "forty-seven percent of children below three years of age suffering from mal-nutrition, forty-six percent stunted and forty percent of rural population in India having the same food grain absorption level as Sub-Saharan Africa" (p-31). Roy asserts that many in India are ignorant or deliberately uninformed of these sufferings living in the same parameters of the most fashionable economic system. It has encapsulated the

nation in social stratas, which have consequently created a sharp divide between idealism and ideology.

Electoral democracy is rendered meaningless when the "Indian state chooses to mortgage its responsibilities to a handful of corporations" (p-32). Roy convincingly assesses that a blatant denial of the 'will of the people' is leading to a different kind of 'secessionist movement' where people become immensely wealthy by appropriating wealth through corruption, jeopardy, terrorism, exploitation, or sometimes by using the legal system.

Roy has in the same vein identified the anomalies of horrific legal acts such as the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) and the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), which have impoverished the people of their 'will' and dispossessed them of their freedom, which a secular democracy otherwise promises.

The militarization of Kashmir and its consequent integration into India as a 'deep state' is deplorable for Roy who has documented the experiences of Kashmiri people in her chapters "How deep shall we dig?" and "Azadi". By repeatedly denying UN resolutions, the proclivities of Indian democracy deprive the Kashmiris not only of their inherent right of "Azadi" but at the same time, snatch their livelihood which vastly relies on natural resources. She presents an upfront series of questions with a vital theme asking when a "government more or less openly supports a pogrom against members of a minority community in which more than two thousand people are brutally killed, is it fascism (p-175)?" The Indian occupation of Kashmir is allowing Hindu chauvinism to target and victimize Muslims in India since the decisions are taken by the majority rule at the Centre. The chilling transformation of democracy into 'Demon-cracy' by the barrel of the gun is transforming India into a virtual police state where religious and ethnic minorities are marginalized.

Roy apprehends that the panacea does not lie in transferring distorted accounts of history and plagued textbooks to future generations. Neither does it lie in the brutal solutions. The sale of hatred could be counterproductive in affecting the collective conscience of the young living in India; perhaps this could be more remorseful than economic robbery (pp-25-75).

Roy is appositely eyeing either for an alternate political system, which can be implemented in its true spirit since she has closely observed the myriad of issues underlying the belly of democracy and its fault lines or she is looking for an immediate solution to inter-ethnic, inter-institutional, inter-paradigmatic, inter-

Book Review

communal and inter-generational confrontations brewing in the flaunted Indian democracy. This is perhaps nurturing a simmering volcano. Hymns of brotherhood and nationhood are great, however they are not enough. It is time to bring ear to the ground and prescribe sustainable therapy for the suicidal schizophrenia of free market and hollowed democracy, which is driving stakeholders from the pole to the post.

The reader can relate to the book well because of the similarities being experienced in Pakistan, perhaps not in terms of systems followed but with one interrupted frequently by boots and the other by secular democracy. However, both carry contradictions from the times of the freedom movement, with one idealizing secularism and theology and the other secularism and democracy. Both failed to connect the biggest things to the smallest dreams and are eventually trapped by players of the world economy. Roy's exploration of what follows a "democracy predominantly ruled by economy" is candidly substantiated in her book, *Listening to Grass Hoppers*. Recommending solutions in inclusive and evenhanded policies, she provides a coherent narrative, arguing that the people and their will must be empowered to uphold the spirit of democracy.

Shamsa Nawaz, Research Fellow,
Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad.
