



ARUNDHATI ROY'S POWER POLITICS-A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT

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Arundhati Roy is a 'Thrilling Political Icon' who represents the coming of Age of feminism. With a novelists' eye for the power of symbolism and the activists' understanding of the purpose of principle; Roy succeeds in deeply embarrassing the Indian state's much vaunted pride as the world's biggest democracy. What has made Roy endlessly fascinating to the western media since she won the Booker Prize in 1997 is her shrewd understanding of how big subjects like nuclear bombs, dams, corporate power and democracy can be communicated to a huge new international audience. In part, it is a straight forward matter of applying her skill as a novelist bringing wit and an eye for the telling detail to abstruse issues such as irrigation or electricity distribution and producing compelling political essays which are both witty and horrifying.

Roy has learned to live and think independently from her experiences. She is determined to do and say what she wants even if her opinion goes against the social norm. To this day; she continues to voice her opinion as a social activist writing about current events in essay form. She is known for her anti-war activist opinions and expresses them bravely in her numerous published essays and speeches. She is indeed a lady with immense potential and her articles contain capacity to impact larger number of readers. She is complicated yet easy to sail with.

Arundhati Roy's 'Power Politics' is a short work of 125 pages including two essays which focus on the travesties being committed in India by foreign (US) companies in the name of 'globalization'. The two main matters discussed are the privatization of India's power supply to US-based energy companies and the construction of massive dams which will dislocate hundreds of thousands of people. The arguments presented by Roy, in this regards, are well-articulated, logical and easy to understand even for the econo-political layman. 'The Greater Common Good,' written in 1999, is an advocacy piece which grew out of Roy's on-the-ground involvement fighting the construction of the Narmada River Dams and, in particular, the projected 139-meter high Sardar Sarovar Dam- 'India's Greatest Planned Environmental Disaster', as she bitterly quotes.

The essay is a screech against big dams and, in a broader sense, against all "Big Projects" dreamt up by government nationally to improve the lives of the people as a whole but which impose seemingly intolerable costs on particular people whether it is big bombs, big dams, big ideologies, big contradictions, big countries, big wars, big heroes or big mistakes. Roy marshals data but she writes with passion and argues like a novelist. She says that she was drawn to what was happening in the Narmada valley because, as a writer, she is drawn to stories, 'the way vultures are drawn to a kill.' (54) And she believes to have found the story of a lifetime, the story of India in the 20th century. Her writings will surely jar some readers because this is not a sterile tale and the author uses staccato sentences and even occasional vulgarities to move the readers. The essay is rich as a tale of India's development as well. The big dams against which Roy rails are part and parcel of the development strategy fostered by Jawaharlal Nehru who affectionately called dams 'the temples of modern India' typical of the government's mega-projects which would allow a dispassionate and benevolent state to master mind rational development and lift millions out of poverty. Roy's essay speaks to one of the core issues of development which always involves choices. Something will be lost and something gained when development occurs. Roy likely argues that when we engage in development we should at least go in with our eyes open; aware of who will win and who will lose and what costs will be paid and for what benefits. In the particular case of the Narmada she opines that the villagers lose everything while the beneficiaries are far away in the cities and in the government. She mentions:

"India doesn't live in her villages, India lies in her villages. India gets kicked around in her villages. India lives in her cities. India's villages live only to serve her cities, her villages are her citizen's vassals and for that reason must be controlled and kept alive, but only just." (70-71)

The writer also questions whether the dam will deliver the benefits promised by the government. She details that despite India's fascination with record keeping there is no single figure of the number of people displaced by India's big dams. Using what numbers are available she conjectures a figure of 33 million people displaced by India's big dams since independence. Thinking of that huge army of displaced people she feels- 'like someone who's just stumbled on a mass grave'. (62) In fact she asserts that the dam will cost more, deliver less, and displace more people than the government claims. In the case of Sardar Sarovar on the Narmada the government has maintained that it was building the dam to deliver water to thirsty villages. Roy is dubious. Noting that the water would have:



“to negotiate its way past the ten sugar mills, the golf courses, the five star hotels, the water parks and the cash crop growing, politically powerful, Patel-rich districts of Baroda, Kheda, Ahmedabad, Gandhinagar and Mehsana; to get to the thirsty villages”. (130-131)

She considers it unlikely that the water will ever reach those needy villagers. *The Economic Times* wrote:

‘Indeed the greedy thirsty cities have taken their share. The height of the irony is that the canal delivering water to the parched area of Kutch is sometimes bone dry’.

‘The Greater Common Good’ highlights the plight of those tens of thousands of people, much lower caste and of India’s tribal groups, who will lose the most because of the Narmada dams. The government is only obligated to provide cash compensation in the event of displacement by an infrastructure project like a dam but many tribal people have no formal title to their lands, thus making collecting compensation nearly impossible. Even where title exists, residents are often inadequately compensated or relocated to hard-scrabbled areas where, ironically, some have died of starvation in their new homes. Frequently, whole communities are split up and sent to different relocation sites. There is a loss of culture, language, temples, archaeological record, and one’s self sufficient life style. She pictures:

“The villagers’ houses were dismantled and moved to the periphery of the colony where they remain today squatted on their own land.”(112)

Embedded in the story of dams and development is also a story of India’s democracy. Yet, on the ground in the Narmada valley, residents would be hard-pressed to say they control their own destiny. In Roy’s telling, the politicians and their allies in the bureaucracy, the dam-building industry, the international aid community, and India’s urban areas ‘lord over’ the people of the valley. Projects like the dam take power away from the people and put it in the hands of a single authority who will decide who gets what and how much- when water is essentially the power of life and death. India’s democracy is ‘*the benevolent mask behind which a pestilence flourishes unchallenged*’. She says:

“It’s time to puncture the myth about the inefficient, bumbling, corrupt, but ultimately genial, essentially democratic, Indian state. Carelessness cannot account for fifty million disappeared people. Nor can Karma. Let’s not delude ourselves. There is method here, precise, relentless and one hundred percent man-made”. (127)

The unstoppable state builds its resources while using its powers to prevent opposition to its plans. In the case of the Narmada Roy details the government’s use of the country’s official Secret Act to prevent demonstrators from gathering. Non-violent demonstrators have been beaten and arrested (Roy herself was briefly jailed for her dam activism). Protestors who vowed to remain in villages, as the waters behind the dams rose, were forcibly removed to deprive the anti-dam movement of martyrs. Roy coins the most fundamental probing question of all: ‘**Who owns this land? Who owns it’s rivers? It’s forests? It’s fish? These are huge questions.**’(50) *‘The Greater Common Good’* is a spell-binding window into contemporary India by a thoughtful, lucid, and passionate participant. With this story of dams, development and democracy Arundhati Roy has indeed told an important tale of India’s post-independence experience.

Roy presents an original voice in her next essay ‘*Power Politics: The Reincarnation of Rumpelstiltskin*’. The essay is very interesting and truly eye-opening. She uses a character in European folk lore to create an image of a power hungry creature. In the story of Rumpelstiltskin, a young woman is faced with the impossible task of spinning straw into gold and told that death awaits her should she not complete it. She receives help from a strange looking man on three different occasions and in exchange for his help he asks for the first child she bears. Lacking any other option to save her life she agrees. However, it isn’t until that child is born that she remembers the promise she made to the gnome. As she pleads with him he tells her that she can keep the child if she can do one thing: *guess his name*. This little man is Rumpelstiltskin and he has returned in Arundhati Roy’s portrayal of world politics. Roy describes him as the powerful, pitiless king like no one has known before- the image of the elite nation, the one that corners the victims into promising something they cannot give. The young woman stands for India- a victim with strikingly few options. From this perspective, Roy continues to address the major problems in the controversy of the public water supply to third world nations, the issue of poverty in the world’s economic and social structure and the fight for basic human rights on multiple fronts throughout the world.

Roy uses her bold writing style to speak her mind on the injustices and deficiencies of the politics of the world. Thus, using the foreknowledge of the strange little gnome she shows that the political forces in the world are mocking the ones they have power over; as the ‘Rumpelstiltskins’ demand the ‘*just reward*’ which the victims are forced to give but are now unable to



provide. Roy argues that political and economic arrangements between the 'first' and 'third' worlds are in dire need of revision. She puts forth the actual plight of the nation saying:

“Rumpelstiltskin thinks big. Today he’s stalking mega-game, dams, mines, armaments, power plants, public water supply, telecommunication, the management and dissemination of knowledge, biodiversity, seeds (he wants to own life and the very process of reproduction), and the industrial infrastructure that supports all this.” (154-155)

Roy articulately comments and brings to the fore the strong hypnotizing power of Rumpelstiltskin and his art to govern the world and capture the weak ones in his mighty grip. Rumpelstiltskin has had his wish, the desperate woman had no option but to surrender to his will and give away the most precious part of her being to him, in lieu of the promise she had made to save her life. 'Power Politics' is a powerful script that blow after blow, with its mighty attack, makes evident how the Indian government, its bureaucrats and its mega companies have been cheated and befooled in the name of contract. Behold this:

“Today, four years later, everything that critics of the project predicted has come true with an eerie vengeance. The power that the Enron plant produces is twice as expensive as its nearest competitor and seven times as expensive as the cheapest electricity available in Maharashtra.”(165)

The Enron seems to hang like an albatross around the government's neck with no choice but to buy Enron's exorbitant electricity. The pressure is on for a re-negotiation. Towards the end of the essay, fed up with the numerous first world policies, Roy declares: ***“Let's bury Rumpelstiltskin”*** (184).

The eloquent, passionate, and political insights of Roy's political essays have added legions of readers to those already existing. Big rather gigantic events are seen by her through the keyhole of daily life. She has an exceptional talent to turn facts, names, and even numbers into flesh and bone. 'Power Politics' is indeed, a book to be read and a breathing to be felt. So fluent is her prose, so keen her understanding of global policies and so resonant her objections to nuclear weapons, assaults against the environment and the endless suffering of the poor that her essay are as uplifting as they are galvanizing.

Roy is well known for her active support of the Narmada Bachao Andolan, a huge movement against the building of a series of dams in the Narmada Valley that will threaten the homes and livelihoods of millions of people. In such grassroots campaigns, along with the anti-globalization and anti-war movements, Roy sees the possibility of building another world free of war, poverty and oppression. In reporting on the rise of fascism in India, she foresees the world barbarism that will result if we fail to fight for our new world. Roy's conscience has turned its attention to the real world, turning her into an electrifying political essayist, for good. At least, one feels honestly that there exists somebody who has the grit to speak the heart. She's entirely far-fetched from those coy writers who lack the power to speak truth.

The essay is a serious thesis on globalization, imperialism and war, which has gripped the entire world creating despair. But Roy is an optimist. The script is well researched, informative and extremely readable. A book that makes the readers rage against the system and want it to get active. She definitely has the ability to instill her courage in others. She assures her readers with comforting words and says:

“Another world is not only possible; she's on her way... I can hear her breathing.” (44) And invites (everyone) to join the fleet.

Works Cited

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