

THE PROBLEMS OF DEMOCRACY: A CRITICAL STUDY OF ARUNDHATI ROY'S SELECT ESSAYS

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ABSTRACT: Arundhati Roy is an active critic of pseudo-development. She is not against development but against the way 'development' is carried out. The majority of the benefits go to the capitalists. She does not deny that fact that a nation needs 'progress' and 'development' but people in India especially the marginalized are suppressed in the name of progress and development. When these marginalized raise their voice, they are tagged as anti-national. Her essays unfold what is happening in the democratic India, about their consequences and aftermath. She also assumes what happens if the democracy is used wrongly. Her essays not only provide an overview but also a detailed under view of events that is happening in India.

Key Words: Democracy, development, pseudo development, religious fundamentalism, capitalism

Arundhati Roy, in her essay “Democracy: Who is She When She’s at Home?”, questions the concept of ‘democracy’. She warns that, if democracy allows free market to maximize profit and spoils nature for material production, then it may lead to apocalypse, “Our amazing intelligence seems to have outstripped our instinct for survival. We plunder the earth hoping that accumulating material surplus will make up for the profound, unfathomable thing that we have lost.” (MSH 464). In a democratic country like India the economic reforms and development projects are implemented for the welfare of the elites. Roy says, “All development in the name of the poor, but really meant to service the rising demands of the new aristocracy.” (MSH 468). In India for the ‘progress’ has marginalized vast majority of people. As a result, it not only denied them their basic right but also deprived them of their right to free speech and made them voiceless.

Roy is an active critic of pseudo-development. She is not against development but against the way ‘development’ is carried out. The majority of the benefits go to the capitalists. She does not deny that fact that a nation needs ‘progress’ and ‘development’ but people in India especially the marginalized are suppressed in the name of progress and development. When these marginalized raise their voice, they are tagged as anti-national. India need progress and development but one need to think and analyze for whom the progress is? who is going to benefit out this ‘progress’ and ‘development’?.

She penned down her feelings unable to bear the ills that are happening around her. She says: “Something about the cunning, Brahminical, intricate, bureaucratic, file-bound, apply-through-proper-channels’ nature of governance and subjugation in India seems to have made a

clerk out of me.” (MUH 465). She criticizes religious fundamentalism in India. The fascist government that passed the Prevention of Terrorism Act. She says that the religious fundamentalists didn't realize that being a religious fundamentalist is itself an act of terrorism.

Roy accuses the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTOA) since it could label as terrorist, from Al-Qaeda to innocent Adivasis as terrorists. She accuses that it has been implemented to terrorize people. The government misuses the act since the minorities such as Adivasis, Dalits and Muslims are terrorized with the act. Roy came across many horrifying incidents that happened in police stations where people are forced to drink urine, stripped, humiliated, given electric shocks, burned with cigarette butts, iron rods put up and beaten to death when she was a member of people's tribunal on Prevention of Terrorism Act 2004.

The Armed Forces Special Powers Act which is implemented in many north-eastern states and Jammu and Kashmir plays a similar role. This act allows even the repressive forces to arrest or even kill any person on 'suspicion'. It is frightful to witness incidents such as gang-rape by the forces, torture, disappearances and deaths under the act are. Despite all these horrors “India retains its reputation as a legitimate democracy in the legitimate community” (MSH 297). This is a metanarrative, “India tells itself that it is a secular and democratic and secular country, though there are numerous anti-democratic, anti-secular factions and practices in India...democracy and secularism are thus metanarratives.” (Ranjitha Venugopal et al. 103)

Roy criticizes that the uniqueness of India is dismembered and destroyed by religious fundamentalism. India is different from other world nations through its diversity and ancient civilization. The democratic institutions like the parliament, the public, the police, the press should not be influenced by any external forces to exercise its power. She says that when a democratic institution is not able to exercise its power, it becomes the early sign of fascism. She says that “Historically, fascist movements have been fueled by feelings of national

disillusionment.” (MSH 173). Since 1947 the people’s feelings has been colonized by the politicians and it has been toyed with for more than half a century. The politicians nurture the hatred for other religion and it is never allowed to heal for the politician’s electoral advantage. Roy makes a comparison of the politicians with termites. They have destroyed the very meaning of ‘secular’ and ‘democracy’ and made it an empty shell. These termites have crippled and demolished the democratic country by weakening the constitution, parliament and the courts and law. There is no use of blaming the politicians because one cannot expect morality from them, which they are not capable of. It is the ordinary people who have to be very cautious of what is happening around them, “if they’ve let us down, it’s only because we’ve allowed them to.” (MSH 173). Roy not only blames the government but also the common citizens who didn’t use the right to vote properly. There is a systematic flaw in Indian democracy which the politicians make use of. It is evident through Gujarat riots.

Corporate globalization has deprived the ‘other’ economically and culturally. The important factors responsible for real social change such as education, public health, land reform, equal distribution of natural resources and the implementation of positive discrimination have been denied and bribed by the elite. Roy insists that armed struggle won’t be the solution for the existing problems. It will aggravate the problem rather than solving it. It is quite evident in Kashmir and north-east. Being poor do not mean that they are weak. They must wage the battle using their strengths and not weakness. She asks the people to protest to get their rights, “The strength of the poor is not indoors in office buildings and courtrooms. It’s outdoors, in the fields, the mountains, the river valleys, the city street, and university campuses of this country. That’s where negotiations must be held. That’s where the battle must be waged.” (MSH 307). She gives this solution because she does not believe entering electoral fray. Whichever political party that came to power, they are not going to protest against or

abolish Prevention of Terrorism Act because both the parties need them. Either they are not going to fight against neo-liberalism. So, there will be no change from within. Also, a political party which gives its voice for poor will naturally be a poor party. It is not possible to face election without funds.

‘Unity in Diversity’ is the very basic instinct of India. She makes the readers realize that the religious hatred is not going to be the solution for the problems prevailing in India, especially poverty,

...will there be a shirt on every back and a roti in every belly? Will every tear be wiped from every eye? Can we expect an anniversary celebration next year? Or will there be someone else to hate by then? Or will there be someone else hate by then? Alphabetically: Adivasis, Buddhists, Christians, Dalits, Parsis, Sikhs?...Will the established rituals continue? Will fetuses be ripped from their mother’s womb and slaughtered? (What kind of depraved vision can even imagine India without the range and beauty and spectacular anarchy of all these cultures? India would become a tomb and smell like a crematorium.). (MSH 163)

India, unlike other countries is not just a geographical landscape. What make ‘India’ an ‘India’ is the people who live in it with religious and cultural harmony despite diverse culture and religion. The free market makes use of the state and its resources. They need a loyal, corrupt, authoritarian governments in poorer countries to create a good investment climate for the corporate. Roy discloses that when citizens of India vote they are actually choosing the repressive power to govern people. She warns about the neo-liberal capitalism and communal neo-fascism. Her essays unfold what is happening in the democratic India, about their consequences and aftermath. She also assumes what happens if the democracy is used wrongly.

Her essays not only provide an overview but also a detailed under view of events that is happening in India.

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