

Arundhati's Demands

May 15, 2014

Arundhati Roy, *Capitalism: A Ghost Story*. Haymarket, April 2014, \$15 paperback.

When you think of ghost stories, you may recall Henry James, Hamlet, or Banquo. Maybe you smell a camp fire, the story going around, the threat of the flame as you extend your arm and that impaled marshmallow over the heat. Or maybe you sense those dying embers, the cool of night taking its grip.

In Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, the ghosts play the role of illuminating something that the world judges to be supposedly good i.e. solid work ethic, but is later evinced by those chain-wielding spirits to be hellish, poisonous, and punitive.

What chains do Marley's ghost rattle and bear? The chains of those he'd sacrifice if he would choose Scrooge's path, the people he'd step on, enslave, chain, if he emulated this old paragon of success. Here, Scrooge is the boss and Marley the worker. It is hard to avoid this Marxist reading of one of English's most classic texts.

In fact, Marx, uses the language of the paranormal to describe capitalism, which he said, "conjured up such gigantic means of production and of exchange, that it is like the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the power of the netherworld whom he has called up by his spells."

At their core, ghost stories imply the dead will not go away.

Arundhati Roy's new book her fourth critical non-fiction book in as many years, is also her most dire. For Roy, capitalism is dead, but in its wake, we are left ill and robbed of our sleep.

The author of the 1997 Booker Prize winner writes like (and lives like) an explorer, a woman working in the field, mosquitoes, jungle mud, and guerillas at her every step. Her daring is contagious. Now, in this new take on contemporary India, her voice is most confident and hyper-aware.

In May 2014, India votes in its presidential election. The front-runner Nurendra Modi has been accused by Salman Rushdie and others of allowing a pogrom against Muslims that killed thousands while serving as Minister of Gujarat. For these crimes, the U.S. State Department revoked his visa. The context of Roy's book seamlessly bridges the political and economic.

"In India the 300 million of us who belong to the new, post-International Monetary Fund 'reforms' middle class—the market—live side by side with the spirits of the netherworld, the poltergeists of dead rivers, dry wells, bald mountains, and denuded forests; the ghosts of 250,000 debt-ridden farmers who have killed themselves, and of the 800 million who have been impoverished and dispossessed to make way for us."

How fresh it is to hear such a bold and rugged report on conditions in Indian war zones from which authorities say, "no news must come."

Nowhere has capitalism's rise been faster than India, especially in the Punjab region, where farmers now call the train line, because of the pesticides which they ingest to commit suicide, the Cancer Express.

Speaking of the at least 2,700 unmarked graves in Kashmir, Roy sarcastically accuses the government. "It is insensitive of the unmarked graves to embarrass the government of India just when India's record is due for review before the UN Human Rights Council."

For Americans, Roy's demographic may seem distant, but the story of India mirrors the growing wealth disparity and its brutal effects in the United States. In America, four hundred people own the same wealth as half the country.

Roy adds, "In a nation of 1.2 billion, India's one hundred richest people own assets equivalent to one-fourth of the GDP."

What this looks like: private land taken from private citizens and given to private corporations for things such as car manufacturing or even Formula 1 racing.

This looks like the land of the most expensive dwelling ever built, "Antilla" home to Mukesh Ambani whose twenty-seven story house is so bright that neighboring towns lament, There is no more night.

India, Roy warns, is now the chain-bearing ghost of its colonial years. Like a climber's rope, dense, taut, and reliable, Roy's prophetic prose leads us to daring heights.

For the rebels, the innocent and the accused, due process does not exist.

"Most of those involved, prisoners as well as witnesses, cannot read or write. One day, in Dantewada too the dead will begin to speak. And it will not just be dead humans, it will be dead land, dead rivers, dead mountains, and dead creatures in dead forests that will insist on a hearing."

Poor farmers, over 400,000 of whom have been imprisoned or relocated, now "await the declaration of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), which will give the army legal impunity the right to kill 'on suspicion.'"

In many villages, especially in Kashmir, there are more soldiers than civilians. Roy describes one female who was arrested in 2011 and tortured in police custody, a schoolteacher named Soni Sori. "Stones were pushed up her vagina to get her to 'confess' that she was a Maoist courier. The stones were removed from her body at a hospital in Calcutta, where, after a public outcry, she was sent for a medical check up."

Later that year, the superintendent of police who conducted her interrogation was awarded the President's Police Medal for Gallantry. Sori remains in jail. This is one many examples of such tragedy and torture from the book.

While Roy repeats some of the revolutionary narrative from her 2011 book *Walking with the Comrades*, her new work remains fresh and biting.

Roy is a restless academic in fatigues. She's a very human writer, down-to-earth, as though she's sharing a story with us around a campfire. Maybe, it's a story we think we've heard before, but it's nighttime, we're cold, and with revolution stirring in Kashmir, the most highly militarized place in the world, we can't go to sleep.

Her demands are radical: an end to cross-ownership in business, the end of privatization of all public services, new universal rights declarations for shelter, education and health care, and finally, the prohibition of inheritance.

Roy knows you don't want to wait until you're dead to spot injustice. Then, it's too late.