

A Letter to “The Economist”

Friday 2 October 2009, by [ROY Arundhati](#) (Date first published: 25 August 2009).

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To the Editor
The Economist

Dear Sir,

This is with regard to the review of my book *Listening to Grasshoppers* that appeared in *The Economist*. If this letter is long, ironically it is because the factual errors in the review are so many. In an attempt to highlight my “flawed reporting and incorrect analysis” the reviewer makes some extraordinary errors and leaps of logic:

1. “Ms Roy cites a massacre of perhaps 2,000 Muslims in Gujarat in 2002, in which the state’s Hindu-nationalist government was allegedly complicit. Almost no senior official or Hinduist agitator has been prosecuted over the atrocity. And Narendra Modi, Gujarat’s chief minister then and now, is currently vying to take over the leadership of the main opposition Bharatiya Janata Party, and one day India. Many of the country’s industrialists would approve of that; even Ratan Tata, the gentlemanly head of the vast Tata Group which prides itself on its ethical dealings, has praised Mr Modi’s business-friendly policies. Nothing annoys Ms Roy more.”

Mr Tata did not merely praise Modi’s business policies, he endorsed him warmly and publicly as a future candidate for prime minister. In India the said Mr Modi is still being investigated for his role in the 2002 pogrom. In his successful election campaigns after the pogrom, Modi brazenly cultivated communal hatred. He is a member of the RSS (Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh), an organization that is proud of its fascist origins and counts both Hitler and Mussolini as its heroes. In addition to the massacres about 150,000 Muslims were driven from their homes during the carnage. Even today, under Mr Modi’s administration, most continue to live in ghettos, socially and economically boycotted in a brutal system of communal apartheid, while the killers continue to live as free, respectable citizens. Incidentally, after considering the available information, the US government has denied Mr Modi a visa. A handicap, wouldn’t you say, for a potential prime minister? Incidentally, for more on the Tata’s “ethical dealings” you could google “Kalinganagar” or “Singur”.

2. “. . . she is not always a reliable witness. Her claim that in Kashmir last summer protesters were as likely to call for union with Pakistan as freedom from India is probably wrong; most seemed to want to be shot of both countries.”

I have never made such a claim. Nobody with an even passing acquaintance with Kashmir would (or should) say something so ridiculous. Given the intensity and violence of the fratricidal wars that Kashmiris have fought, and the thousands that have lost their lives over the Pakistan vs Freedom issue, and given that Kashmiri leadership is still unresolved about the question, it’s extraordinary that the reviewer can so casually and so glibly claim to know what the majority of people of Kashmir want. My essay on Kashmir is actually titled “Azadi”, which in Urdu means “Freedom”. Perhaps the reviewer is unfamiliar with the language?

3. "More typically, she appears to gather her facts from newspapers (her articles strike the reader rather as 'lounge notes'), before selectively arranging and then exaggerating them to suit her own ends. For example, about 25% of India's territory is alleged to be affected by a Maoist insurgency, but that does not make it, as Ms Roy writes, 'out of government control'."

If the reviewer had cared to read the book instead of ransacking it, he/she would have come across a sentence that clarifies that several of the essays are "responses to the responses" about certain events. Given that much of my book is a critique of the disturbing role that a section of the corporate media has played in these events, is it surprising that media reports are frequently referred to? Most of the time this is in order to expose them for being false and motivated. To conclude from this that my "facts are gathered from newspapers" and that the articles are "lounge notes" is laughable.

The figure of 25 % of India's territory being under Maoist insurgency is a figure advanced by the Indian security establishment and is probably a slight exaggeration. However, it is a fact that vast swathes of India's territory are out of government control. It is for this reason that the Government has announced that in October, after the rains, there will be a military operation in states like Chhattisgarh, Orissa and Jharkhand in which ground troops will be backed up with helicopter gunships and satellite mapping. A brigade headquarters is being established in Raipur (Chhattisgarh), and 26,000 paramilitary troops (the same Rashtriya Rifles who are deployed in Kashmir, and similar to the Assam Rifles deployed in Assam, Manipur and Nagaland) are being raised for this war. This is in addition the thousands of security personnel who are already deployed in these areas. Perhaps the reviewer has never visited Dantewara, seen the burned, empty villages, or crossed the Indravati into the territory that is called "Pakistan", where police and security forces do not venture? Perhaps he/she hasn't heard of Abujmaad?

4. "Beyond India, her grasp of her subject-matter gets looser. If Ms Roy believes, as she writes, that a good portion of Africa's 'contemporary horrors' are caused by America's 'new colonial interests', she would do well to pay a visit to the continent."

My book is about India, not Africa, but yes, there is a paragraph about Africa. Here's the sentence the reviewer refers to: "The battle to control Africa's mineral wealth rages on — scratch the surface of contemporary horrors in Africa, in Rwanda, the Congo, Nigeria, pick your country and chances are that you will be able to trace the story back to the old colonial interests of Europe and the new colonial interests of the United States." My mistake here is that I didn't mention the new colonial interests of countries like China and India as well. Does your reviewer not know about the legacy of Shell Oil in Nigeria? Or the politics that surrounds the mining of a mineral called coltan? Or of how Belgium's colonial regime structured the barriers of hatred between the Tutsis and the Hutus in Rwanda with their racist profiling and social engineering? As for the recommendation that I pay a visit to the continent . . . it's a grand idea, but how does one visit an entire continent? I have visited parts of it. Plenty of times. But the reviewer should know that it is possible to know things about places even if you haven't been to them, like historians know things about history without traveling back in time.

5. "For a more measured analysis, Ms Roy should perhaps turn to the finance ministry's recently published *Economic Survey*. There she would read that, 'High growth is critical to generate the revenues needed for meeting our social welfare objectives.' Ms Roy should take note."

Am I really being waved back into my seat with the finance ministry's *Economic Survey*? I thought everybody knew that the cut back on public spending (social welfare objectives) is almost in direct proportion to the growth rate? It's often a pre-requisite when loans from the World Bank, the ADB and the IMF are negotiated. Isn't that what structural adjustment is all about? Or is this the old Trickle Down theory being re-cycled? I've always wondered about this. Sometimes they say the Free

Market provides a level playing field — but then when questioned, they ask us to wait for Trickle Down. But things only Trickle Down slopes don't they? Anyway, there is a school of thought which believes that people actually do have rights. The right, for instance, to resist the Government taking away their land and their livelihoods, often at gunpoint, and then ordering them to wait for the leftovers (if the gentlemen leave any) to trickle down after the feast.

Regardless of our obvious ideological differences I hope you agree that errors and innuendo of this nature undermine the real debate.

With best wishes,

Arundhati Roy

P.S.

* Arundhati Roy, born on 24 November 1961, is an Indian writer and activist. She won the Booker Prize in 1997 for her novel *The God of Small Things*.