

'Kashmir needs *azadi* from

By Syed Hamad Ali

'In Gujarat we all know what happened, they massacred Muslims and then came on TV and boasted about it'

EVER since she shot to global fame following her 1997 win of the Booker prize for *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy seems to have concentrated her creative energy on raising awareness about pressing social and political issues.

This is the woman who described terrorism as the "privatisation of war" and called George Bush a "world nightmare incarnate".

No surprise then she was dubbed "the Indian author of one good novel and many peevish essays" in a New York Times article.

Roy, who is an anti-globalisation campaigner, once famously said that the "only thing worth globalising is dissent". As an opponent of the Iraqi invasion she walked a very fine line of what is considered acceptable when she was quoted urging people to "become the Iraqi resistance", albeit through non-violent means.

Last month the Indian novelist wrote a lengthy newspaper article calling for Kashmir's freedom in which she argued: "India needs *azadi* (freedom) from Kashmir just as much as - if not more than - Kashmir needs *azadi* from India".

Predictably, accusations of "sedition" and of being a "loose cannon" were once again lobbed by critics inside

the country's political establishment.

"Here in India you have people saying that the government should do to Kashmir what the Russians are doing to Chechnya", Roy tells the New Statesman. "There is a great admiration for military solutions right now."

So it comes as no surprise her detractors would prefer Roy to keep quiet - especially when it comes to Kashmir.

"It is a great tribute to the tolerance of India's ethos that a person who openly calls for Balkanisation of the country is not being locked up and the keys thrown

are stationed to impose India's grip on the region. At the same time around 200,000 Hindu Pandits have also been uprooted and forced to leave the largely Muslim valley.

Roy says that it was the sight of Kashmiris themselves protesting, sometimes in the hundreds of thousands, that she felt actually gave her the right to write about the issue. "They were very clear about what they were saying", she says.

Even back in April when Tibet was the focus of global attention, The Times of India noted: "the problem of Jammu

Nearly half of India's children are clinically malnourished. 'What about a society in which a million people earn their living carrying human shit on their heads'? adds Arundhati Roy. 'Is it alright because we have some market and nuclear bombs'?

away", commented the ruling Congress party's Manish Tiwari. Yet Roy seems unfazed. She was in the troubled state recently to witness the mass demonstrations there by locals protesting Indian rule. "For me being there makes me feel humiliated as an Indian," she says. "There are very many beautiful things about India which are all coloured by this."

Since an insurgency began in Kashmir back in 1989, at least 40,000-60,000 people have been killed.

An estimated 400,000 Indian troops

and Kashmir is the elephant in the room which Indians debating Tibet are doing their damndest to ignore".

Many, however, are still determined to cling onto Kashmir. The opposition BJP's General Secretary, Arun Jaitley, went so far as to state openly in a TV interview: "I am one of those who firmly believe that *azadi* is not even a distant dream for those separatists, it is an impossible thing". India today is the country with the third-largest Muslim population in the world at close to 150

million. As its only Muslim majority state Kashmir, so the argument goes, is crucial to the secular and the multi-ethnic makeup of the nation. When confronted by such reasoning Roy is quick to retort: "The Muslims of India and the Muslims of Kashmir are both held hostage to each other."

"That is a very specious argument of theirs, you look at what's been



Arundhati Roy

happening in India even now with the Hindu VHP massacring Christians in Orissa", continues Roy whose own mother hails from Kerala's Syrian Christian community. "The state is standing back and watching. In Gujarat we all know what happened, they massacred Muslims and then came on TV and boasted about it."

The 2002 riots in the western Gujarat state left more than a 1000, largely Muslims, dead with many accusing the state's Chief Minister, Narendra Modi, of complicity in the events by turning a blind eye. To date Modi remains a free man and a popular governor in his state. But he is an extremely divisive figure. While some call him India's Hitler, others speculate he is a future prime ministerial candidate.

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trotting out this business of it being secular", Roy notes.

The novelist is just as concerned about the disparity between rich and poor in India. She describes the middle and upper classes as existing "in a whole little country of their own". With many cheering the rise of the "New India", as millionaires and billionaires prop up everywhere, conditions in parts of the country remain worse than Sub-Saharan Africa according to recent World Bank estimates.

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poor with roughly 75 per cent of it's population living on less than US\$2 a day.

Further nearly half of India's children are clinically malnourished. "What about a society in which a million people earn their living carrying human shit on their heads"? adds Roy. "Is it alright because we have some market and nuclear bombs"?

She says although a battle was fought for India's independence in 1947, in her view it wasn't really a revolution. "The people who were ruling the roost during the time of the British Empire continued to do that after independence", says Roy. "The

American elections", she says.

Even with Bush due to make his much anticipated exit and an air of expectation about the potential of the first ever black US President - assuming he wins of course - Roy remains pessimistic and refuses to give her endorsement to either Obama or McCain.

She predicts the coming months will see Obama turn into a white man and warns against expecting a miracle: "He'll have to prove that he is whiter than the white man. And if it was Hillary Clinton she would also have had to become a white man."

But surely Obama would be an improvement over the more conservative, hawkish, McCain? Roy acknowledges the US presidency is a very powerful position but says that she feels such a complex system has been put into place that he is not really able to make decisions himself. Roy compares the situation confronted by the US electorate to the one faced by their Indian counterparts in picking between Congress and BJP. "It is a humiliating choice", she says.

Yet, in spite of all she sees wrong with the society she lives in, Roy is clearly infatuated with India: "I could have lived anywhere in the world now if I wanted to. But every moment of my day is so absorbing, is so full of so much richness. In terms of the debates and the excitement going on here. The varied ways in which it comes at you and the complexities you have to deal with. The completely unpredictable nature of my life. Now these are the things I love". COURTESY NEWSTATESMAN

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same policeman, the same justice system, the same brown sahibs neatly stepped into the shoes of the white sahibs. Like dalits, for example, why wouldn't they prefer British masters to upper caste masters"?

As a fervent opponent of US foreign policy she supported neither Bush nor Kerry during the 2004 elections.

Roy has likened the choice to an option of two brands of detergent owned by the same company.

"I kind of resent the idea that the whole world has to be interested in the