

**Rooney, S. (2021). *Beautiful World, Where Are You*. Faber & Faber, 288 pp, ISBN 978-0571365432**

*Reviewed by Shibani Phukan*

Irish novelist Sally Rooney dazzled the literary scene in 2017 with her debut novel *Conversations with Friends* which was shortlisted for a host of awards including the Dylan Thomas Prize and the Desmond Elliott Prize. This was followed by her second novel titled *Normal People* which was longlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2018 and went on to be adapted for television and was broadcast on BBC in 2020. While *Normal People* explored the story of two teenagers from either side of the class divide who go on to study together in college, navigating a relationship enmeshed in class and gender hierarchies; *Conversations*, again, looked at love, relationships and career choices contextualized in an inescapable gendered and class-structured world. Rooney's latest offering, *Beautiful World, Where Are You*, not only takes the narrative forward in multiple ways but also enriches it by factoring in issues beyond class and gender and leads to a pertinent examination of the very purpose of literature.

*Beautiful World* revolves around four protagonists, there is Alice who is a successful writer, and her friend Eileen who works for a literary journal; Simon who is a common friend, and Felix who works in a warehouse and gets thrown into the mix as a result of a blind date with Alice. At one level, the novel is a bildungsroman, an individual journey of each character, but it is also a journey about their friendship, a friendship that sometimes turns romantic, that evolves, gets complicated, competitive, even acrimonious at times, as the novel progresses. As one has come to expect with Rooney, each character is keenly sketched out in their materiality, and this in turn is seen as impinging upon their relationships and their perception of the world. While there is a predilection for self-reflexivity strongly present in each, it sometimes lends itself to an ironic, almost detached observation of one's self and actions; or results in extreme anxiety; or as is often the case with over-thinking, it results in self-loathing and a surfacing of insecurities. This tendency not only comes in the way of each character's own happiness and sense of fulfilment, but also prevents them from having meaningful relationships till these anxieties are addressed.

Almost like a parallel narrative, the personal unfolds against a deeply political world, often interweaving with the personal, chiefly through an exchange of emails between Alice and Eileen. These email exchanges which punctuate the personal narratives with regularity is about a wide range of subjects—ponderings about life, faith and religion, environment, aesthetics or how we define it, the capitalist obsession with productivity, consumerism, the unreflective living in our own bubble of privileges, the preponderance of social media and the culture it breeds ... In fact, much of it reads almost as non-fiction, and some might even construe it as a rant, but one can, and perhaps one should see it as writing that is deeply invested in politics. That perhaps is what many readers and critics, feel uncomfortable with, because Rooney questions everything, spares nothing and nobody, and that could be unsettling for most. This discomfort often takes the form of rather harsh criticism of Rooney's work at times. However, what one finds underlying such criticism is a discomfort that critics and readers at times have with women's writing in general which is then camouflaged by categorizing Rooney's writing as chick-lit, therefore fluff, and unworthy of serious consideration.

In fact, if one is able to go beyond such superficial readings of Rooney's novel, one would find that a meaningful discussion the novel engages with is about literature itself, about why we write what we write, the function and very purpose of literature. The novel seems to suggest that there lies a vacuity at the heart of contemporary literature, perhaps mirroring that of life itself. Writers are seen as mostly disgruntled, complaining about things that are obviously projected as unimportant such as a bad review, or a lack of publicity; and thereby hypocritical when they go on to write their "sensitive little novels about 'ordinary life.'" Such observations are primarily about contemporary European-American literature and while their truth value needs research; one can with some confidence claim that it could not possibly be universal. Much of the writing that emanates from India, for example, is marked by its rootedness, its immersion in troubled politics, born of a compelling urge to speak out. This is true of a wide variety of Indian writing, from feminist retellings of mythologies, Dalit and tribal literature, the promising growth of literature from violence-torn Kashmir or the northeast. So, it leads one to question if the novel is clouded under a pall of pessimism and offers a bleak view of all things. Perhaps not is the answer one will arrive at if one looks beyond the obvious. *Beautiful World, Where*

*Are You* does not interrogate the possibility of there ever being a world like that. The novel through its introspection of a wide range of issues, examines all that holds us back from creating, striving towards such a world. It is at heart, like most of Rooney's novels about finding hope, finding love, the possibility of doing so, only if one is willing to let go of the irrelevant, the poisonous, the superfluous. The world for Rooney can be beautiful but not when the happiness of a person, or a class, is at the expense of another.

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