
***The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* by Arundhati Roy: A Book Review**

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ABSTRACT

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) presents the story of a transgender woman, Anjum, who lives in a crumbling Delhi neighborhood. After a massacre in Gujarat, India's current Prime Minister Narendra Modi stands accused of complicity in the killings of Muslims in the same state in 2002, she flees to a cemetery and establishes a new life there full of colorful characters. Alongside this narrative is a wider perspective set in Kashmir. As she recently told the Guardian, these two sections become one book because, "geographically, Kashmir is riven through with borders, and everybody in the book has a border running through them," she said. "So it's a book about, how do you understand these borders?" Roy is scathing of India's behavior in Kashmir, accusing the military of torture, extra-judicial killings and disappearances. Roy wants readers to understand that state-backed violence across India is central to economic benefits for the minority who have become enriched through destructive neo-liberal policies. One can't happen without the other. This violence permeates the book because so many characters either suffer because of it or inflict it on the less fortunate. This could be physical or psychological and the author is often explicit in her descriptions. This is an India that's far away from the glossy tourist brochures advertising a tranquil holiday at the Taj Mahal. This section could be written by any number of Indian critics about Roy herself, incensed that a citizen of their country dares to publicly shame the human rights abuses of the current and previous governments. Roy's life is committed to those less fortunate than her, more marginalized and hated by the majority. It's where the best writers should always be. It's hard not to be transported to India with Roy's love and revulsion of her birth country. The book isn't a dry exercise in political culture but a rich and detailed look at a nation that overwhelms visitors and citizens. Roy is unforgiving of its mainstream leadership but embraces the myriad of characters she has created.

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness (2017) is a fascinating and complex book about modern India that will challenge anybody who thinks they understand the world's largest self-described democracy. Roy wants readers to be uncomfortable with characters that sparkle with humanity, wit and anger. It's hard not to be seduced with a work that forces us to confront what populations in democracies routinely don't see or choose to ignore. This is as relevant in India as in Palestine. In her novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, published in 2017, Arundhati Roy traverses the borderline between political and aesthetic in very vivid terms. When writing fiction of historical and political kind, writers often appear to be grappled by the binary of 'topicality' and 'literariness'. However, critics often seem to overlay this debate. What is essential in fiction in general and political action in particular is

how it engages with the dialectic of reality and creates its "topicality" and "literariness" out of that. Literature distinguishes itself from other forms of writing in "how" it narrates that dialectic of reality through its own self-contained imaginative world. As the eminent writer and critic Olive Senior says: "We are all enmeshed in politics because we are all citizens of somewhere even writers and we cannot escape being shaped by political decisions, big and small. Does this mean that I am advocating that literature as I have narrowly defined it should be in the service of Politics? Absolutely NOT. The raw material of writers is the entire world that we live in; a world that continuously shapes us as we in turn shape it, through our poetry or fiction. The writer is someone who has no choice but to be engaged with society, which means political engagement. The difference lies not in what we write but in the how.

The function is not to present the world as it is, but to present it in a new light through the narrative power of art. Literature does not ask ‘What is it about?’ It asks ‘How do we tell it to make it real?’” (Edinburgh Writers Conference 2013)

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* her second novel after the publication of the much acclaimed “The God of Small Things” in 1997, Roy enters into the arguments concerning our contemporary political existence which often bears starkly contested discourses. The novel indeed makes for a compelling fiction. Roy often argues for a fiction which agitates the human sensitivity towards the issues of grave importance. The implied lesson is that in the times we are currently living in, where fake news and false information arguably accentuated by the space of social media and technology, writers do need an active engagement with “how” of the storytelling in reflecting the human condition with an exploration of all of its probabilities and improbabilities. Now coming to the subject-matter of the novel, anyone interested in a passionate understanding of the modern Kashmir’s predicament, its fall into the total abyss of conflict and violence punctuated by occasional illusory calm, with an increased emphasis on New Delhi’s ever diabolic treatment of Kashmir and Kashmiris, “The Ministry of Utmost Happiness” is a good read. The novel, in an Orwellian vein, also paints a rather dystopic picture of the contemporary India. An India which seems a far cry from the utopia envisaged in the “Tryst with Destiny” dreams. An India, which overtaken by the pernicious neoliberal lords, exploits and pulverizes the lives of its marginalized classes like Dalits, Adivasis and religious minorities. An India which has a ‘democracy’ to show, but is not able to give dignity to its minorities political, caste, gender and religious. This dystopic picture painted in the novel may not be that far away from the realities of the contemporary India. Kashmir is a place where darkness envelops its victims but also entrances its many visitors through natural beauty. As one character Musa is described: “He knew that Kashmir had swallowed him and he was now parts of its entrails. In the heart of a filthy war, up against a bestiality that is hard to imagine, he did what he could to persuade his comrades to hold on to a semblance of humanity, to not turn into the very thing they abhorred and fought against.” Throughout the book, Roy conjures up imagery reminiscent of the finest magical realism of novelist Salman Rushdie but she never strays far from real life. In one striking passage, Roy utilizes her wit and sarcasm to devastating effect, mimicking those who blindly admire or celebrate India (or any country?) without question: “Compared to Kabul, or anywhere else in

Afghanistan or Pakistan, or for that matter any other country in our neighborhood (Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Burma, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Good God!), this foggy little back lane, with its everyday humdrumness, its vulgarity, its unfortunate but tolerable inequities, its donkeys and its minor cruelties, is like a small corner of paradise.” “Children play at ringing doorbells, not at being suicide bombers. We have our troubles, our terrible moments, yes, but these are only aberrations.”

Having amply redirected New Delhi’s political chicaneries in Kashmir and the undeniable oppression of Kashmiri Muslims by India, the face out of this narrative’s layer presumes to talk about the deep intricacies of the Kashmir conflict but yet, it denies representation to the other side of the conflict, it doesn’t dwell on the question of Kashmiri Pandits fairly. Though it gives the impression of talking about them, it fails to fully expose the deep fault lines and contradictions within the broader politics of Kashmir. As American New critics, Wimsatt and Beardsely would object to and caution against the ‘intentional fallacy’, between the lines of Roy’s narrative, what comes to the fore is Roy’s own anarcho-syndicalist and radical left outlook which seems too overawing in it. It also appears that the novel seems to have committed a classical fallacy when it comes to any writing fiction, journalistic and academic about Kashmir that the Kashmir conflict/issue/tragedy is all about ethnic Kashmiri Muslims because it is they who they take the center stage, either as sufferers or collaborators. All other minorities, ethnicities and sects who represent diverse political shades are relegated to the margins of invisibility as if they have come across nothing.

The God of Small Things won the Booker Prize for Arundhati Roy. Two decades later emerged her second novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. In the years between, Roy grew/evolved into an internationally renowned writer activist a voice for the marginalized, dispossessed, the outcastes and the oppressed. She took up arms together with Medha Patkar and wrote passionately against the construction of the dam over the Narmada River to which hundreds of villages, wildlife and forests were sacrificed in the name of development. She spent about three months and marched by side with the tribals of Chattisgarh labelled as Maoist rebels and terrorists, and once again she wrote passionately about the injustices meted out to them in her book *The Broken Republic*, my favorite. Over the years, she visited the Kashmir valley, spending days with the people, listening to their stories, seeing what was left unsaid and she wrote with compassion and quiet

determination! Once again, with a passion that is so characteristic of her, about the murders, the rapes, and the burnings; crushing hopes and dreams of generations. The Ministry of Utmost Happiness is a tale of Old Delhi beginning in the cramped quarters of Jumma Masjid with its narrow streets and derelict old houses, a silent witness of bygone genteel days of the Moguls. It spreads out into the ever growing new metropolis and beyond, to the forests of central India and to the valley of Kashmir. “where war is peace and peace is war, and where from time to time normalcy is Two threads, the tale of Aftab and the tale of Tilottama and the stories within stories weave The Ministry of Utmost Happiness, a novel of magical-realism. Aftab, a transgender assigned maleness at birth. They are known as *Hijra* derived from the Semitic Arabic ‘hjr’ meaning ‘leaving one’s tribe’. They live in tightly knit organized communities or families known as ‘gharanas’ with a ‘guru’, ‘ustad’ or head of the family. On entering such a family, the new member goes through an initiation ceremony. Aftab undergoes the painful removal of his male genitals and transforms into the beautiful woman Anjum in Khwabgah or the Palace of Dreams with her family of transgender men and women where she grapples with her sexuality and an intense desire for a child. After a journey to Gujarat where she witnesses the pogrom against the Muslims, she returns to Khwabgah and finds that life had taken on a different turn while she was away. Dejected she leaves the Palace of Dreams and moves into a cemetery and amidst the graves founded the Paradise Guest House, a community of queers, addicts, orphans, Muslims and other dropouts from the society. At a demo in Jantar Mantar, a baby was found abandoned amidst the refuse covered with dirt dark as the night. The police are called. Anjum eyes the baby with a fierce longing. In the commotion that followed while waiting for the police to arrive, the baby disappeared. Where did the baby vanish to no one knew! The baby dark as the night was whisked away by Tilottama aka Tilo makes her invisible-visible presence on the scene. Tilo is an architect from the South. She is dusky, unconventional, and irresistible to the three men who love her—a journalist, an intelligence officer and a rebel activist whom she follows to Kashmir. Arundhati wanted to write about everything and anything that moved her spirit. She exactly does that in her second novel. The injustices, prejudices and the contradictions in India are vividly portrayed with a drama consciousness, which makes it appear as a companion to her political writings and essays.

This is further highlighted writing as she uses different styles of writing throughout her novel, be it fairy tale narration, reporting or filing of first

information reports and interviews! Arundhati is often inclined to compare the rising fascism and leadership in India to Nazism and Hitler in the 1930s. Arundhati’s language is superb, poetry in prose. With her skillful use of words, she paints the dreams and fears, compassion and generosity, the sorrows and hopes of her characters. The romantic India, the land of tolerance and spirituality is revealed as a country ridden with caste and caste atrocities, the very rich living in their gated communities and the poor migrant laborers who built these communities, the ritually pure and the impure; where rape is rape in all its regional languages and men are publicly lynched on the mere unwarranted suspicion of carrying beef. Though often clever and witty, sometimes it makes one want to scream in frustration and anger or give vent to tears and sadness. She boldly uses offensive swear words in her book and does not hesitate to call a spade a spade. Some of her characters are so odd, amusing and exaggerated that it could only come from imagination. It is a dark novel, in the sense it is moving and acutely painful. She conjures a world often brutal and in the midst of this brutality there is hope. There is kindness. She plays with dualities to prove a point; innocence and evil; kindness and harshness; the world of the third sex and other social outcasts and ‘Duniya’ or the so called ‘normal’ world. She weaves a rich and colorful carpet. This carpet has holes and these very holes make you to pause, reflect and continue reading further. The novel starts in a Muslim graveyard and also ends there, The Paradise Guest House. The heroes and heroines are men and women who have been broken by the world they live in and then mended, healed by love and by hope; they are vulnerable as well as invulnerable and above all they are not victims but survivors as they do not surrender and thus is Paradise created. India is a subcontinent, a country with many religions, linguistic cultural groups, regional languages and ethnic groups; a country culturally rich because of its very differences, and the ubiquitous caste system, India’s pain and bane! Roy has taken on this mammoth task of presenting to her readers, this complex nation with all its conflicts, as an advocate for the marginalized and the outcasts of the society, ecological degradation, the tribals or the Adivasis, human rights violation and for peace in Kashmir, skillfully narrated using dualities and symbolism. Cultural Anthropologists, Sociologists, Political scientists, Activists, Writers and others would readily recognize that the novel is a fictional rendering of data collected by her from her travels into Kashmir, walking together with the tribals of Chatisgarh, intimate knowledge and sympathy for the transgender community in Delhi and from her own experiences as a sociopolitical activist.

The story ends with the picture of a rapidly urbanizing India, which pushes the motley group of dispossessed individuals to their happy shelter in a graveyard. What befalls the soldier Murugesan is indicative of the multiple layers of violence in the country. Murugesan, the dark Dalit from Tamil Nadu, is teased for his complexion by his colleagues and the locals of Kashmir. However, he represents the army that often resorts to violence to maintain peace in the valley. But back home in Tamil Nadu, he is a Dalit who cannot expect a dignified treatment in his village. By juxtaposing different instances of violence, the reader is often made to see the tensions underlying the functioning of a complex democracy. The range of issues woven into the novel's plot is as broad as the issues Roy has been engaged with in the last two decades. The clever device she has adopted to tie these issues together is the wandering Tilo. Resilient and clear-sighted, she is detached enough to understand issues in different parts of the country and empathic enough to make personal connections with the victims of various kinds of violence. Arundhati Roy's journalistic side can be an occasional turn-off for the avid fiction-reader. Roy's simultaneous self-cultivation as an informed activist as well as a writer clearly comes through in the way reportage is interwoven into the fictional narrative. Perhaps in modern India, very few can afford to practice the craft of fiction-writing while remaining indifferent to what is happening around them. There are two interesting correlations here with respect to orientations of two groups of Indian writers who write in English. First, there are those who present the rising urban middle class's brighter picture of the country. Then there are the ones like Roy who refuse to ignore the Adivasis (the indigenous inhabitants who traditionally lived in forest land) who are displaced by industrialization and the urban slum-dwellers who are displaced by the growth of the organized city.

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