

On Art and the Artiste – Arundhati Roy on *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

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Twenty years ago—back in 1997—I was a first-year undergraduate studying English literature at the University of Dhaka when Arundhati Roy's debut novel *The God of Small Things* took the literary world by storm. Remembering the name, so talked about in the department lobby back then, I paid a visit to a local bookstore and purchased a low-priced edition of the Booker Prize-winning work. I loved reading this tragic, semi-autobiographical tale of a doomed South Indian family at that time. I wondered then when would I see another novel from the author, who was once, curiously, listed as one of *People* magazine's most beautiful people, and who, apparently, lacked a literary background! The wait seemed endless all these years.

June 8, 2017. It was Election Day in England, and I booked a ticket to meet and listen to Arundhati Roy talk about her second novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. I was looking forward to enjoying an evening of some sort of entertainment and escapism. The event was planned at the historical Cambridge Union Chamber and I was aware the talk would also showcase a conversation between Roy and Dame Gillian Beer, the emerita Professor of English Literature at Cambridge, who was the Chair of the Judges for the Booker Prize in 1997, the year in which Roy won. Pretty soon, however, I realized that there would be no reprieve from election talk as someone from the audience asked Roy to comment on Britain's left-wing Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn's prospect of winning. She reacted with what seemed instinctive humor, joking that her knowledge of British politics was limited; however, she quipped that if he really won she would be delighted. I am, of course, well aware of Roy's radical left commitment to principled resistance, and of the fact that she has been writing fiercely in the intervening twenty years and publishing dozens of essays, non-fictions and making documentaries championing the rights of the subaltern, protesting against state-sponsored corruption, extreme nationalism, environmental degradation and campaigning for Kashmiri independence.

As I was cycling to the historic venue earlier, I kept thinking: what voice could I expect to hear from Roy now – the political activist or the literati? I had already started reading *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, and it was already apparent to me that unlike her first novel, this one is less focused on the personal and the private than on "the vast, violent, circling, driving, ridiculous, insane, unfeasible, public turmoil of a nation." Politics would be high on the agenda, I had concluded, as I approached the venue.

Nevertheless, Arundhati Roy claimed, rather categorically, in her talk that political activism was not on her mind while she was toying with idea of the book: "To me there is nothing higher than fiction. Nothing. It is fundamentally who I am." She

continued to mystify the process of writing, saying "I don't really remember [about how she began writing the book], and also that 'the fiction just takes its time.' To answer how the characters panned out in her head, she said, confidently: "They just take their own course." And, she said she had felt that she needed something atypical for her new novel: "a language to tell the story" which was neither English nor Hindi/Urdu, but something else that could help her "make sense of the world" by binding together "worlds that have been ripped apart."

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness commemorates these worlds - the lives, struggles, and triumphs - of several of its characters, including, but not limited to queers, addicts, Muslims, and orphans. Even animals, such as a kitten, about to be drowned by a group of soldiers, a dung beetle, Guhi Kyom, are given agency by her. I thought that the statements she made during the talk,

when she was reading from the book – Chapter Two – Khwabgah – to the mesmerized audience:

They had been waiting for their Aftab for six years. The night he was born was the happiest of Jahanara Begum's life. The next morning, when the sun was up and the room nice and warm, she unwaddled little Aftab. She explored his tiny body – eyes nose head neck armpits fingers toes – with sated, unhurried delight. That was when she discovered ...

Roy's depiction of the life of the trans woman, or *hijra*, Anjum in the conservative Muslim quarters of Old Delhi, also comes across as fascinatingly original. Anjum, born intersexually as Aftab, wishes "to put out a hand with painted nails and a wrist full of bangles", and eventually joins a *hijra* home. Roy conducts an utterly

the kind you people want to write about."

As a bit of film buff myself, I could relate immediately when Roy recounted how in 1970s Bollywood screenplays, there was always a hero of the downtrodden and who is no longer to be seen in present-day Mumbai films. In *The Ministry*, in a similar act of instinctive defiance, Roy's Anjum builds Jannat Guest House, bit by bit; – it is a home to an outlandish medley of the excluded: untouchables, Muslim converts, *hijras* and addicts. Anjum thus transgresses borders.

Running in tandem in *The Ministry* is another elaborate narrative, set in and about conflict-inflicted Kashmir where "Death was everywhere. Death was everything." In Roy's depiction of Kashmir, there are relentless scenes of misery. Nevertheless, again and again beautiful images appear to refresh our perception of the world. While she was reading from these pages, we could sense the deftly situated pleasurable and unpleasurable images in her narrative – from the frightening military terminologies of the region to the natural landscape of "herons, cormorants, plovers, lapwings," and the "walnut groves, the saffron fields, the apple, almond and cherry orchards."

Roy's designated protagonist in the Kashmir narrative is the enigmatic middle-class woman Tilottama, nicknamed Tilo, who shares some striking biographical details with Roy herself. In college for architecture in the 1980s, Tilo was close to three men – all of whom end up getting involved with the Kashmir conflict in the narrative.

I had a feeling that the Kashmir episodes have all the ingredients for a separate novel altogether. For Roy, however, these different strands are all congruent. Tilo connects everyone as Roy gathers her cast together around Zainab, an abandoned child. Tilo ferries the child and Anjum decides to adopt Zainab. To the Anjums – "To, The Unconsoled" (the book's dedication), the child is a renewed source of light to their Jannat Guest House, which now stands for alternative structures of kinship, resistance, and romance – all together an imagined inverse of paradise. Anjum, the unlikely hero of the downtrodden, exclaims—"Come to Jannat Guest House", you know? Everybody's welcome!" Roy exclaimed with her characteristic smile: "She breaks it ... and that, for me, is so sweet."

Roy's fiction is moving, which is why for me, any concern of a fissure between art and activism in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* seems absurd. By the end of the talk, I had to raise my hand to ask Roy, "Do we have to wait for another twenty years to ...? Before I could finish, everyone had erupted in laughter.

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Arundhati Roy in Cambridge.

PHOTO: CHRIS BOLAND

such as the one that she never revises her books, were a bit of swagger. But by the time I finished reading *The Ministry*, I must confess, I felt some unease about her deployment of point of view as a narrative device – the two central stories of the book, I feel, never comes together seamlessly; everyone in the novel seems restless from some terrible experience of loss; they are all constantly chased by memories and yet are all driven by unattained dreams. "Normality in our part of the world is a bit like a boiled egg: its humdrum surface conceals at its heart a yolk of egregious violence." To me, several of the characters of *The Ministry* appear to have been transmitted there from the pages of Roy's non-fiction; they all make the reader feel that each one of them is worthy of his or her empathy. Her decision to bring in so many varied voices appears to me now to be completely political.

"I think my brain is only that of a fictional writer." Roy's claim came alive

convincing novelistic census of the entire neighborhood: "I wanted to write where I'm just drifting around, the way I do in Delhi, in mosques and strange places."

But later, on a visit to Gujarat, Anjum is attacked by right-wing Hindu mobs. "In India, everything is decided by caste," Roy declared to us, "What I love about Anjum is that when she's caught up [in the massacre in Gujarat], she's spared because she's a *hijra*." Another *hijra* points out to Anjum, "The riot is inside us." Traumatized but in a show of single-minded determination, she sets up home in a graveyard; she meets her sidekick, a former mortuary worker Saddam Hussain, a man obsessed with "courage and dignity" "in the face of death," traits that extremists in the country love to associate with the slain Iraqi leader. Anjum hates it when filmmakers, NGOs and foreign correspondents try to feed off her tragedy and tries to distract them by saying: "Others have horrible stories,

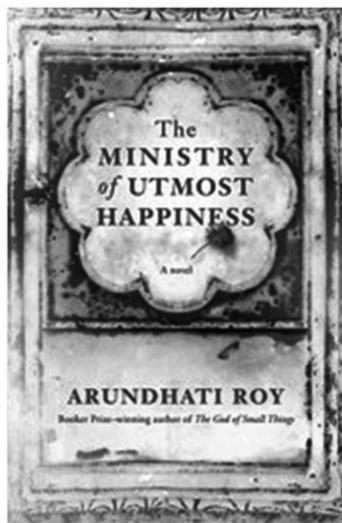
Fictionalizing an Unhappy World

SABIHA HUQ

"A single book could contain so much of everything, so much anguish and joy and love and war and death and life, so much of being human" – is how Anita Felicelli in *Los Angeles Review* reacted to *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Arundhati Roy's latest novel. As she observes, this is the kind of book that makes one feel that life is worth living.

Written 20 years after *The God of Small Things*, Roy's new book focuses on a world where "people, communities, castes, races and even countries – carry their tragic histories and their misfortunes around like trophies, or like stock, to be bought and sold on the open market" (Roy). *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* ties the two strings of its plot—a hermaphrodite or a 'hijra' named Anjum from old Delhi, and a woman called Tilottoma who has three lovers from sundry backgrounds. Millennial India is portrayed in the novel through the eyes of these people. Roy depicts thereby the debasement of life through commercialization in her times, and in the process, confirms her position as a writer committed to critiquing capitalism and globalization.

In her wonderfully woven narrative Roy beguiles the reader into seeing what most Indians tend not to see: the 'khababgah' or dreamland that is the counterpart of *duniya* or the world, and a resistant Kashmir that is the counterpart of "rising" globalizing India. Roy draws attention to the dark nature of events in contemporary India and puns grotesquely



with the phrase 'utmost happiness'. The implications of the pun (and the title) become clear when Aftab aka Anjum is asked by another *hijra*, Nimmo Gorakhpuri, "D' you know why God made Hijras? He decided to create ... a living creature that is incapable of happiness."

A complex turn in relationships make all the major characters meet at Jannat Guest

House, located between graves in an Old Delhi graveyard. There is a sense of extremes coming together in the novel and of juxtapositions of government forces and separatists, aristocrats and the homeless, the colluding media and critics of globalization. The net result is the reader's encounter with a wonderland gone awry. The plot brings together diverse fragments of Indian society in such a manner that the reader is ready to suspend his disbelief at what he or she encounters: Muslims, dalits, hijras, Kashmiris, abandoned children and stray dogs. Such deprived sections of Indian society constitute in the narrative an incredible assortment of beings whose stories contribute powerfully to a narrative dedicated to the underprivileged ones of the world who are brutalized by the so-called "progress" bestowed by globalization. Delhi, as the novel describes it, was "to become supercapital of the world's favourite new superpower."

India! India! The chant had gone up – on TV shows, on music videos, in foreign newspapers and magazines, at business conferences and weapon fairs, at economic conclaves and environmental summits, at book festivals and beauty contests. *India! India! India!* But the novel looks at the world from the viewpoint of the oppressed and not from that of the upholders of, "shining India." Thus we meet Aftab, a boy born with girl parts, and Anjum, a woman captured within a

male body, who one day decides to leave home and start living with the hijras. The growth of New Delhi as well as the decaying old Delhi is seen through the eyes of Anjum; her experience becomes the centre point of an India experiencing riots.

In a Gujarati shrine, Anjum is caught up in a massacre of Hindu pilgrims. The consequent government action against Muslims brings about a dramatic change in her clothing and mind. Saddam, a young low caste Hindu working in the mortuary whose psychological upheaval made him change his religion in private, is another victim of the riot.

India's apparent peacefulness, the novel suggests, is achieved at the cost of the death of thousands such as Saddam's father. His death triggers a sense of revenge in Saddam and he carries out a vigil for the murderer of his father, although there is no single murderer to be found.

Tilottoma is an abandoned child whose own mother adopted her, and she is set in a world where living means refusing the luxuries of the world and looking at it with melancholic indifference. Nagaraj and Biplab come from the upper or upper middle class of India, and their narratives depend on how each observes the deception of globalization and progress – sometimes indifferently, and sometimes in self-imposed delirium. Musa, the Kashmiri underground leader and Tilottoma's lover, comes back from a feigned

death with the wind of change that blows at the end. The personal is political and vice versa in the novel.

One interesting aspect in the novel is the lost and recovered children. Zainab is raised by Anjum, bringing happiness and change in her life, and Jebeen is abducted by Tilottoma. Her upbringing by the mothers in Jannat Guest House is given importance. The little girl signals change in this terror-stricken world. The tiny dung beetle Guhi Kyom, therefore, senses that everything would turn out alright.

The question for the critical reader at the end of the novel is whether the forced optimism in its final pages has been worked works out effectively, especially since there remain hundreds of exploiters like Amrik Singh and all kind of syndicates that are prospering so in the twenty-first century. And yet Roy is also a writer who claims to be a twin of the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano for whom the great tragedy of humanity wasn't that we die or suffer or make each other suffer; it is that we so often forget what we should remember. Perhaps the author did not after all want to think of the possibility that that there is a world beyond the graveyard for Jebeen, which she must cross to reach the ministry of utmost happiness.

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THUMBNAIL REVIEW



Sparring with Spirits!

ISHRAT BINTE AFTAB

Poetry can be defined in a thousand ways, and yet its essence will continue to elude us. A poem might be someone's imagination reflecting on a streetlight, an escape from emotion for another, or perhaps, a parenthetical take on reality for yet someone else. But poetry can also be penned on the canvas of life in a lucid manner. Witness the verse of Lutfun Nahar Anam, a social worker and physician's collections of verse (*Je Ful Kotha koy*) and folk literature (*Banglar Lokoj Shahitto*) brought within one cover in *Je Ful Kotha Koy O Banglar Lokoj Shahitto* by Kaler Dhoni Publications earlier this year. The attractive book cover, I should add at this point, is by Mostafiz Karigar.

Lutfun Nahar Anam was born in Sherpur, Mymensingh in 1945. Growing up in a conservative household, or marriage to Ahmed Mansur Anam, son of the popular journalist, politician and literary figure, Abul Mansur Ahmed, did not prevent her from pursuing education or poetry. *Je Ful Kothakoy O Banglar Lokoj Shahitto* thus reveals her love of poetry as well as her interest in our folk literature.

Anam's is a fascinating work. The first part, *Je Ful Kotha Koy* reveals her metamorphosis over time as she reflects on life, and nature, on youth and growing up. In them we come across her dreams, hopes, desires and beliefs and even her spiritual yearnings. All through her poems we feel her humane impulses. She deploys in her verse images from nature as well as everyday life.

Banglar Lokoj Shahitto the second part of the book, collects rhymes and riddles from rural life. Lutfun Anam has diligently collected in it rhymes based on every letter of the Bengali alphabet and ingenious riddles too. These verses will surely appeal to children as well as adults and will no doubt lure them all toward earlier modes of learning—modes that are a far cry from current ways in which they educate themselves.

Charismatic poet and avid collector of folk literature that she is, Anam has given readers in *Je Ful Kotha Koy O Banglar Lokojshahitto* a book of considerable charm and enduring appeal!

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