

An Abstract of The Dissertation Entitled: A Hermeneutical Approach to *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*: A Novel by Arundhati Roy

By

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B.A.English Language and Literature

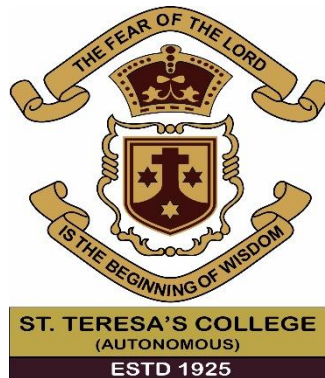
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The *Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is the second novel written by the Booker Prize winning author Arundhati Roy. The book that made it to the Man Booker Prize longlist is more than just fiction. It is politics and history transcribed in emotive language. The thesis is an attempt to analyse the novel taking into account the idea that a text is an entity dependent on external factors like the author's past life and experiences that shaped her views. An attempt has been made to read between and beyond the lines. The first chapter introduces the theory with which the thesis is approached. In the process the methodology of analysis of the novel is revealed. The second chapter is a rough tour of the life of the author from a sought after writer to a detested polemicist. The third chapter attempts to apply the hermeneutic methodology in the novel. Why the novel is relevant in an Indian context is discussed. The chapter ends with a call for action. The concluding chapter points out what the author achieved through the novel and the inherent message it conveys.

**A HERMENEUTICAL APPROACH TO *THE MINISTRY OF
UTMOST HAPPINESS*: A NOVEL BY ARUNDHATI ROY**



*Project submitted to Mahatma Gandhi University in partial fulfillment of
the requirement for the degree of BACHELOR OF ARTS in
English Language and Literature*

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this project entitled “A Hermeneutical Approach to the Ministry of Utmost Happiness: A Novel by Arundhati Roy,” is the record of bona fide work done by me under the guidance and supervision of Dr. Jisha John, Lecturer-in-charge, Department of English.

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CERTIFICATE

I hereby certify that this project entitled “A Hermeneutical Approach to *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*: A Novel by Arundhati Roy,” by Husna Hasan C A is a record of bona fide work carried out by her under my supervision and guidance.

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INTRODUCTION

An acute observation of Arundhati Roy's second novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* leads us to the conclusion that the novel is a political guide to India, both historical and cultural conveyed in the language of literature. One who is unaware about the present political scenario might find the novel strange as one might find strangeness in a work of fiction's attempt to keep fidelity to the truth in the picture. "Truth is stranger than fiction, but it is because fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities; Truth isn't" (Twain 96). But one need not worry. *The Ministry* is politics that transcends time. Anybody who has a sense of understanding about the working of the world would relate to the instances of the novel which are largely universal. The novel paints a portrait that almost looks like a modern art from which little can be comprehended at first glance. The sort of characters presented does not seem to stick together, the characters might appear repulsive or toxic but nevertheless are moulded to stick together in the portrait.

The aim of the thesis is an attempt to analyse the novel by being "the kind of readers that writers dream about (3)" as Roy has acknowledged in her *the god of small things*.

The first chapter titled, "Hermeneutics, the Art of Interpretation" states the tenets of the author oriented theory that has been used to analyse the book. Since hermeneutics does not belong to any particular school of thought and confers relative freedom to the reader, only those tenets have been mentioned that is used in the process of analysis.

The second chapter titled "Power of Words over Swords; Journey of an Un-archetypal Indian from *The God of Small Things* to the author of *My Seditious Heart*" attempts to introduce Arundhati Roy as an author and a spokesperson. The chapter

also attempts to trace her journey as a writer of fiction to an essayist diverging from the usual trend established by the 'trend setters' in contemporary Indian fiction. Not that it is unusual for writers of fiction to comment on current and relevant issues. But unlike the many others who were brought up in an affluent background, who strove to be posited among the top institutes in the country, earning in dollars and then giving it up entirely to embrace the awestruck fan following, writing exactly what they want, the Bollywood style wooing that tickle their superficial mundane reality, granting contract rights for the film adaptation of their novels, Arundhati Roy has a different story to tell and thus, a different lesson to teach.

The third chapter titled "Why *The Ministry of "Utmost Happiness"*? Prescience and Redemption" attempts to analyse the relevance of the novel in the present scenario giving careful attention to its artistic brilliance by roughly analysing the patterns of metaphor. It also probes why the novel has in its title "Utmost Happiness" although it is considered to be a poignant narrative of human sufferings. An attempt has also been made to decipher the message that the novel inherently conveys to the audience and the redemptive effect it plays.

CHAPTER 1

Hermeneutics, the Art of Interpretation

In simple terms Hermeneutics deals with interpretation. It evolved from interpreting texts of not mere literal value like the Bible. Biblical exegesis grew in importance as theology gained ground as an important academic discipline. Over time Hermeneutics has come to include any interpretation that takes into strict relevance the authenticity of the author. The author is the creator. The text is the brainchild of the author. Unlike what Reader Response theorists attempt to do, a complete understanding of the text is not possible completely removing the author from the sphere. Modern Hermeneutics has come to find its application in fields like Archaeology, Architecture, Environment, International relations, Law, Political philosophy, Psychoanalysis, Psychology, Religion and theology, Safety science and Sociology.

Hermeneutics does not belong to any specific school of thought. It is not a science per se. There are no written norms or modes of understanding for that matter. For any hermeneutic interpreter to remain true to a work two requirements are a must. First, knowledge of language, and this implies the knowledge of the language in which the author has written the text and second, knowledge of the idea represented in the text. The interpreter might be required to seek academic help regarding the things or ideas that s/he doesn't have adequate information about.

Interpretation and understanding involves analysing the text. Stylistic peculiarities, the usage of language, the usage of certain terms to represent certain ideas, possible hidden or innate meanings, the plurality of aspects of meaning etc. should be considered. The effect the author has through the text on the reader is also important. Through a greater sphere of understanding the collision of the knowledge

sphere of the author and the reader takes place. The reader perceives that information from the text as is expected from him in a reading. He would then combine additional information that he might know about the life and experiences of the author and reach an assumption regarding why the author chose to say so. The more complex the text, the more complex the task. Likewise, the more complex the author, the more complex again, is the task at hand. The author is not expected to comply with the understanding of a particular interpreter. Rather it is the 're invention' of the author that takes place. The interpreter should be able to draw out how and why the author meant a certain thing in the text to be in a certain way without the author himself consciously making an attempt to do so. This is because when a person makes a completely intelligible utterance of any great depth, there is an already existing process of refinement and condensation that organises the ever-flowing thought process that let it to be in words. When the reader attempts to make the reading he gets a glimpse of the author's thoughts. Hermeneutic circle is the understanding that the part of a text cannot be understood in isolation from the whole and vice-versa. A continuous return to various individual elements of the text is thus deemed necessary. Also, the text has to be understood in the proper cultural and historical context.

According to Friedrich Schleiermacher, considered as the father of modern hermeneutics "all understanding consists of the two moments, of understanding the utterance as derived from language, and as a fact in the thinker" (qtd. in Abulad 15). Reference is to the technical and psychological faculties that govern the thinking processes. He further reasons that "on the one hand we try to decode the words, and on the other hand we try to read a mind... Complete understanding is an understanding of the utterer better than he understands himself" (qtd. in Abulad 6). Prejudice and presuppositions on the part of the reader are unavoidable and is by itself not without

value. They are the result of a lifelong commitment of independent thinking nourished by exposure to information and knowledge. They shape our responses as we read.

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness is the much awaited second novel of Arundhati Roy, published after a long gap of twenty years. The book went on to make it big to the Man Booker Prize longlist. As the author herself has explained in various reading circles and interviews, the book draws many parallels from her experiences as an author and as a spokesperson. It is like a companion piece to the non-fiction essays that she has written. Those essays were written hurriedly to address emergency issues and to attract public attention. The novel is a more condensed and perhaps, depending on the reader, a more sinister depiction of her non-fiction works. She finds no reluctance in explaining the plot of her book even attempting to detail the characters. Many of the bloody instances in Indian history - the Gujarat riots, the Babri Masjid demolition, Kashmir insurgency, The Naxal revolt, the Bhopal Gas Tragedy - finds voice in the novel. Without digressing the focus on facts and figures or on the number of people displaced or the casualties suffered the author subtly portrays the impact of the cruelties and repression of living in a namesake social but largely capitalistic second largest democracy in the world. In other words, the novel from a hermeneutical point of view is not so much about the story or about how it begins or ends as much as it is about the journey and how we reach the destination.

CHAPTER 2

Power of Words over Swords: Journey of an ‘Un-archetypal’ Indian from *The God of Small Things* to the Author of *A Seditious Heart*

Some authors find writing a social destiny. Only a few are able to make it a living. Even fewer meet the purpose. Pen for them, is a double edged sword. It hurts the hand that creates the wound. Branded ‘anti-national’ and ‘pro-Pakistani’, the first non-expatriate Indian to win the coveted Man Booker Prize for her debut *The God of Small Things* that fetched over one million dollars in twenty countries even before it hit the stands in India, who was pedalled into international fame over a single night, portrayed as the face of ‘Brand India’, Arundhati Roy was someone who had every reason and choice to choose the glitz and glamour of an average Indian dream. The chapter is an attempt to trace the journey of India’s proud daughter from a feminine figure to becoming one of the countries harshest critics.

Only a year after the publication of *The God of Small Things*, the year 1998 saw the Indian political situation change, and the Atal Bihari Vajpayee led BJP government rose to power in the centre. Less than two months in office, they carried out a series of nuclear tests in the name of ‘national security’ as justified by the then Defence Research and Development Organisation chief Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam. The national dailies hailed the event as India’s journey towards becoming a nuclear superpower. “Explosion of Self-esteem, Road to Resurgence, and A moment of Pride, these were the headlines in the pages in the days following the nuclear test” (Roy, “The End of” 17). Opinion polls showed that there was national consensus on the issue. “It’s official now. Everybody loves the bomb. (Therefore the bomb is good.)” (Roy, “The End of” 9). Except the fact that the ‘everybody’ comprised of 400 million

illiterate people who live in abject poverty, who have absolutely no idea regards even the basic technical terms ‘atom’ and ‘fusion’ that can culminate in something as diabolic as the nuclear bomb. Let alone the terms ‘nuclear winter’ and its permanent destructive effects that can make them rethink. Possibly, the then government saw only the feasibility of the option and decided to feed its citizens with the notions of nationalism expecting little resistance from intellectual sceptics. What was not expected was for someone like Roy, rich, beautiful, and more importantly a complete ‘Indian Product’ who won the prestigious Booker award (the former two Indians who bagged the same award was Naipaul and Rushdie) to make news again with her critical views on the hypocrisy of the Vajpayee led fascist regime.

She begins *The End of Imagination* thus:

May 1998. It’ll go down in history books, provided of course we have history books to go down in. Provided, of course, we have a future... I am prepared to grovel. To humiliate myself abjectly, because, in the circumstances, silence would be indefensible... Once again we are pitifully behind the times - not just scientifically and technologically (ignore the hollow claims) but more pertinently in our ability to grasp the true nature of nuclear weapons. Our comprehension of the Horror Department is hopelessly obsolete. (3)

Her plain writing style, meant to inform than complicate, to enlighten the horror stricken minds, to instigate in them a sense of solidarity, with her subtle sense of rhetoric and quirky retorts, one-liners that sound the death knell of the intended – ideologically, and being brave enough to proclaim to a nation her solid stance even if that means having to give up all the glamour and pomp that came to be associated with her. “It is not some inherent, mystical attribute of nuclear bombs that they

automatically inspire thoughts of peace. On the contrary, it is the endless, tireless, confrontational work of people who have had the courage to openly denounce them... that is what has averted, or perhaps only postponed, nuclear war” (Roy, “The End of” 13).

The essay *The End of Imagination* acquires prominence as the first non-fictional work of Roy that introduced to the world the moral force that she can be - compelling, destructing and disturbing. Needless to say she was immediately kicked off the pedestal of international reputation, and lowered to the rank of an “occasional rich writer” (Roy, “The End of” 7). A considerable section of population who did not want the incendiary subjects of sexism and blind anglophilia in her *God of Small Things* to be addressed branded her just as an author of ‘Children’s book’ and was expressly hostile towards her reaction. She expects her readers to “divorce hope from reason” (Roy, “Listening to Grasshoppers” 3). The themes of her works disrupt deep rooted notions and portrays uncomfortable realities. “People don’t know how to deal with it... They have to find ways of filtering it out” (Roy 2007). Nevertheless the fierceness with which she exerts herself would move anyone. One does not see a novice but a well-informed and concerned conscience in her surgically framed arguments. In her essay she states that if, on the one hand it was India’s paranoia that led her to create a Weapon of Mass Destruction, on the other, although not widely publicised was capitalism and political power play. She assures her readers that it is not a writer’s naivety. She is not merely being flippant but is well aware of the unrest it would cause among the public and more importantly the chaos it would bring to her own life.

The fact that all this, this global dazzle – the light in my eyes, the applause, the flowers, the photographers, the journalists feigning a

deep interest in my life...the men in suits fawning over me, the shiny hotel bathrooms with endless towels – none of it was likely to happen again. Would I miss it? Had I grown to need it? Was I a fame-junkie? Would I have withdrawal symptoms? If protesting against having a nuclear bomb implanted in my brain is anti-Hindu and anti-national, then I secede. I hereby declare myself an independent mobile republic. I am a citizen of the earth. I own no territory. I have no flag. (Roy, “The End of” 14, 21)

The 2018 Hindi commercial movie *Parmanu: the story of Pokhran* dedicated to the soldiers, engineers and scientists of India begins with a quote by former President Dr. A.P.J Abdul Kalam “Unless India stands up to the world no one will respect us. In this world fear has no place. Only strength respects strength” (*Parmanu* 00:02:07-02:13) True, the movie would make any Indian swell with pride watching the commitment and dedication of the people involved in the operation. The cautiousness with which they cover every aspect of the operation, even recreating the effects of a sandstorm so that the American satellite overhead would not capture any suspicious activity. But the fact that the premise on which it is based is a long out-dated and myopic philosophy should make a true citizen budge.

Even Pakistan can't be solved by pointing nuclear missiles at Pakistan. Though we are separate countries, we share skies, we share winds, we share water. Where radioactive fallout will land on any given day depends on the direction of the wind and rain. Lahore and Amritsar are thirty miles apart. If we bomb Lahore, Punjab will burn. If we bomb Karachi, Gujarat and Rajasthan, perhaps even Bombay, will burn. Any

nuclear war with Pakistan will be a war with ourselves. (Roy, “The End of’ 24)

Born on 24 November 1961 in Shillong, Meghalaya to Rajib Roy, a Bengali Hindu tea plantation manager and Mary Roy, a Malayali Syrian Christian teacher, Roy had a turbulent childhood with her parents divorced at the age of two. Back home, her mother who had married someone out of caste could not find a school that would accept her daughter. Determined that she would educate her daughter, Mary Roy started a school named ‘Corpus Christi High School’ in 1967. Having a school that was run by her mother might have given her the freedom to have an intellectual space of her own. Needless to say she was encouraged to think independently from an early age. Mary Roy, who campaigned against the then existing inheritance legislation for women of the Syrian Christian community in Kerala, is a social activist in her own right. According to the official website, her school now called ‘Pallikoodam’ considers Malayalam as the official medium of instruction till standard four. When Arundhati was just 16 she ran away from her home and lived for some time in a tin roof hut that could fry onions in summer. During this time she earned her living by selling empty beer bottles. She later joined the ‘School of Planning and Architecture’, Delhi. She married a fellow student and together they moved to Goa. After a brief stint as a hippy she and her husband ended their relationship. A lifetime of experiences spanning borders, both regional and cultural, she is a typical example of what Tharoor would term as an ‘un-archetypal’ Indian. Perhaps it is the inspiration from her life that compelled her to retaliate against the impracticality of Article 44 of the Directive Principles in the Indian constitution which states that the state shall endeavour to provide for all its citizens a uniform civil code throughout the territory of India. Roy says at a lecture given at the British Library after the publication of her

second and latest novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, “If a novel can have an enemy, then the enemy of this novel is the idea of one nation, one religion, one language” (Roy 2018)

Although her *God of small things* is often compared to the works of Faulkner and Dickens because of the way it dealt with issues of class and caste and her poignant narration on family life she never used to be an ardent reader of literary works as a child. The novel, which took four years to complete, considering it came from a “highly unambitious person” (Moss 2018) with just an architecture degree, is an experimentation with fiction itself as a genre. Her two novels abound with stylistic innovations and literary peculiarities. How can someone who is not familiar with the classics of fiction even attempt to experiment with the art of fiction as a genre to see what its limits are? “I don’t know the rules of literature and so I didn’t know I was breaking them” (McGirk 1997). Even by reading only the prescribed literary texts at school she showed early signs of brilliancy in her school life.

Her mother says about her,

Arundhati is a born talker and a born writer. While she was studying in our school it was a problem to find a teacher who could cope with her voracious appetite for reading and writing. Most of the time she educated herself. I can remember our principal Sneha Zofaria resorting to Shakespeare's *The Tempest* as a text for the little fourth grader (qtd. in Simon).

Roy admits that because of the circumstances in which she was born, fatherless and a hostile mother, she used to be in some ways, a “pretty adult child” (Lewis 2018). Unlike most children of her age she didn’t have the luxury of a childhood all colours, rainbows, and butterflies. One after reading her *The God of*

Small Things might wonder if she actually laments missing up on an ordinary childhood. It's almost as if she wished somebody told her that she too had a childhood even before she became an adult. Caught amidst family feuds and adult matters she developed the temperament to see through people's faces from an early age.

Roy's celebrated phrase "one is not born but rather becomes a woman (Simon)" asserts the venomous role of society in casting a female as womanly. "A natural-born feminist" (Moss 2018), life had prepared her to overcome the narrow expectations put on her by the society. It was never her forte to impress anybody and thus succumb to the social pressure of internalising the process of moulding oneself to become an agreeable 'marriageable' lady so that you would have your stakes high when the contract is drawn. In an interview, on asking about the status of women in the state where she grew up she replied,

Women from Kerala work throughout India and the world earning money to send back home. And yet they'll pay a dowry to get married, and they'll have the most bizarrely subservient relationships with their husband. I grew up in a little village in Kerala. It was a nightmare for me. All I wanted to do was to escape, to get out, to never have to marry somebody there. Of course, they were not dying to marry me. I was the worst thing a girl could be: thin, black and clever. (Roy 2007)

Incidentally, life had other plans for her. To mould her not to impress, but to inspire, to not shunt herself in the darkest of days, to not blunt her pen in the face of expressly hostile threats, to see pain in terror, to sympathise with 'terrorists', to see happiness in commitment, to laugh and crack jokes with the Maoist guerrillas of Central India, to see through the blinding glitter of globalisation and to make her one

of the most sought after intellectuals not just in the country but worldwide, not just among the literati but the glitterati.

It's easy for me to say that I thank god that I had none of the conditioning that a normal, middle class Indian girl would have. I had no father, no presence of this man telling us that he would look after us and beat us occasionally in exchange. I didn't have a caste, and I didn't have a class, and I had no religion, no traditional blinkers, no traditional lenses on my spectacles, which are very hard to shrug off. I sometimes think I was perhaps the only girl in India whose mother would say, "Whatever you do, don't get married". For me, when I see a bride, it gives me a rash. I find them ghoulish, almost. I find it so frightening to see this totally decorated, bejewelled creature who, as I wrote in *The God of Small Things*, is 'polishing firewood'. (Roy 2007)

There is an unmistakably apparent amount of despondency laced through her works. Being a warrior in a land of strict and set ideologues exhausts anyone. But for someone like Roy, it is all a matter of priorities that keeps her going. She proclaims in her first essay; "There are other worlds. Other kinds of dreams. Dreams in which failure is feasible. Honourable. Sometimes even worth striving for. (15)"

Finding happiness in the unlikeliest of places is an art she has long mastered. She undertook the dangerous mission of interviewing the Maoist Naxals in their lair at Central India's Dandakaranya Forests. She says "Everyone is in danger here. You can't especially be in danger" (Moss 2018). She says that it is her insatiable urge to search for a story and not compassion that leads her to understand the issues around her. She wrote in her essay *The Greater Common Good* that supported the Narmada Bachao Andolan movement. "I went because writers are drawn to stories the way

vultures are drawn to kills” (Roy 1999). Once she reached the predetermined meeting spot she was blindfolded and taken to a remote place in the forest in a car. When she came back as a ‘Maoist sympathiser’ she publicly proclaimed that she doesn’t condemn the violence employed by the guerillas against the police and the army anymore. When reminded that the maelstrom of violence caused by them has also lead to the deaths and injuries of innocent civilians caught in the crossfire Roy responds, “Can the hungry go on a hunger strike anymore” (Moss 2018).

An extract from *Walking with the Comrades*: ““I asked him,” Comrade Leng said in his lovely Telugu accented Hindi, “why do you think Naxalites are always like this?” – and he did a deft caricature of a crouched , high-stepping, hunted looking man emerging from the forest with an AK-47, and left us screaming with laughter” (Roy 2010). One gets an impression of the author sharing a comfortable space with an acquaintance the author had met and forgotten some time back and not someone who the ex-P.M Dr. Manmohan Singh referred to as ‘the gravest internal security threat to India’.

An anthology of Roy’s publicised essays titled *My Seditious Heart* is set to release in 2019. The book to be published by Penguin Books has on its cover, a happy and passive looking Roy, one hand in pocket, wearing a casual looking blue-black dress matching the colour of night which seems to dominate the picture notwithstanding the dimness of the streetlight, kneeling onto the wall of possibly a grocery shop, shutter closed, when the streets would normally be empty, except in the picture for three youngsters having a merry time riding a bike, none of them wearing a helmet. As for Roy, she seems not to mind the merry making youngsters who have long interred in them the belief that ignorance, the very act of indifference, is not just bliss but a matter of survival.

Arundhati Roy's life and works are a testimony of a life of resistance, redefining the ideals of liberalisation. In the race for achieving more freedom we should not forget whose stakes we are compromising. It is necessary that one stand up against odds to fight against injustices or at the least have the nerve to acknowledge it. Her experiences in the journey of resistance proves that the path is indeed tedious and dangerous. Nevertheless, she guarantees that it is a life worth living. A life worth dying for.

CHAPTER 3

Why *The Ministry of "Utmost Happiness"*? Prescience and Redemption

Stripping off all the necessary literary adornments and underlying plot structure that makes the story one, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is all about the air prevalent in the subcontinent. A rough skimming of any national daily concludes that the air is a polluted one, a corrupted and crooked version that constantly casts a pale gloom. An outsider might find this shocking. A native, amidst his efforts to conceal the grime focuses only where the limelight falls. One can't help being reminded of the mixed reactions that the legendary success of the 2008 film *Slumdog Millionaire* evoked among its audiences. Roy writes in her essay *The End of Imagination*:

How desperately we want to believe that. What wonderful, willing, well-behaved, gullible subjects we have turned out to be. The rest of humanity may not forgive us, but then the rest of the rest of humanity, depending on who fashion its views, may not know what a tired, dejected, heart-broken people we are. Perhaps it doesn't realise how urgently we need a miracle. How deeply we yearn for magic. (5)

The chapter is an attempt to analyse the relevance of the novel in the present scenario giving attention to its artistic brilliance by roughly analysing word innovations and patterns of metaphor.

Roy says in *The God of Small Things*, "And the air was full of thoughts and things to say. But at times like these, only the small things are ever said. Big things lurk unsaid inside" (142). Even though it took her ten years to write her second novel

perhaps she knew all along it was coming, since '97 and with the publication of *The End of Imagination* it almost felt a necessity. “And the truth is if you live in India, or in Kashmir, you will know that there's so much to be said, there's so much wilderness, there's so much Imagination that hasn't been enclosed, and that I think is what makes our battle so ferocious” (Roy 2011)

The Ministry of Utmost happiness is about the big things in the air, the history, and politics and how it seeps into your space, intruding into your life, your house, and your bedroom. The novel does not follow a linear narrative but is interfered by different narrative perspectives that represent different status quo. In just three sentences the blurb gives the plot “Anjum, who used to be Aftab, unrolls a threadbare carpet in a city graveyard that she calls home. A baby appears quite suddenly on a pavement, a little after midnight, in a crib of litter. The enigmatic S. Tilottama is as much of a presence as she is an absence in the lives of the three men who love her” (Cover copy). For Roy who considers fiction as the truest thing there ever was (Roy 2007) and believes that those who are shocked by the truth are not deserving of the truth, the book is the answer to a deeply troubled and riddled world. No wonder she dedicates it to ‘the Unconsoled’, by becoming a voice for the ‘voiceless’ – “the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard” (Roy 2004).

The story follows a transgender in the first chapter “Where do old birds go to die” (3), and her struggle with the ‘pseudo-identity’ conferred on her by biology. One sole existential question asked by an imam in a mosque troubles her deeply, even by her standards – “Tell me, you people, when you die, where do they bury you? Who bathes the bodies? Who says the prayers” (5)? Perhaps unprecedented in Indian fiction is Roy’s portrayal of the Hijras of Old Delhi in a way as poignant and

deliberate as in the book. It's awkward but it's terrifying too. It's funny but it's painful too. Like when Anjum's mother gets hit by the truth about her child, who was actually proclaimed a boy at birth under 'understandable circumstances', i.e. power cut.

Is it possible for a mother to be terrified of her own baby? There, in the abyss, spinning through the darkness, everything she had been sure of until then, every single thing, from the smallest to the biggest, ceased to make sense to her... She knew there was a word for those like him – *Hijra*. Two words actually, *Hijra* and *Kinnar*. But two words do not make a language. Was it possible to live outside language? Jahanara Begum rested after what she created had scrambled her sense of the world. (7-8)

As a confused reader turns pages after page, confused because perhaps it is the first time it occurs to him that the vulgar creature with the mutilated sex parts that he so considered filthy and humiliated him by 'showing off' in packed trains and crowded streets has a life home, it dawns to him that the entire novel, and it deals with issues sinister, betrayed characters, hapless victims and, innocent disgrace, is the answer to the mother's prayer, perhaps in ways she herself cannot fully comprehend, when towards the end, scarred life stories that had their trust shattered under a regime in which they had put their complete trust on forsook them finds a harmonious refuge on her shoulders. "Look after him. And teach me how to love him" (11). Jahanara Begum was taught how to love her baby. And in the process, we fall in love too.

'Chutzpah' (pronounced hu:tz-pah) is a relatively new term in Indian vocabulary popularised by Vishal Bardwaj's 2014 film *Haider*, an adaptation of

Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The protagonist originally uses the Finnish term which roughly means an abundant confidence showed by an establishment to justify the apparently unjustifiable acts of atrocities to veil the real agenda behind it. Like when a juvenile seeks pardon from an old judge in a court for acquitting him from patricide. 'How do you expect me to show you mercy after committing a crime as heinous as murdering your own father', asks the kind old man to which the boy replies 'because now I am an orphan' (Hindi Scenes). Following Shahid Kapoor's performance comparing the word with 'AFSPA' (Armed Forces Special Provisions Act), which incidentally also rhymes with it, web bloggers took up the word to compare it to the simultaneously hilarious and grave misadventures of politicians. One cannot help considering *The Ministry* as an audacious attempt of Chutzpah taking into account that the same forces of partisanship and hatred that shot Ghandi is still ripe, nourished and backed by fascist foundation in the present times too. She earns the bail and license at the same time when the mandatory disclaimer in the first page innocently guarantees that the novel is a work of fiction and any resemblance to any actual person, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental. Like referring to Sanjay Gandhi as Indira Gandhi's "spoiled younger son", and the 'Maintenance of Internal Security Act' that came into force following the Emergency in 1976 as a medium for his acolytes to carry out his fiat on the general population (34). "The Poet-Prime Minister" (41) referring to Vajpayee and "Gujarat ka lalla" (63) referring to Narendra Modi. "Blue-turbaned Sikh economist" who had also the political charisma of a 'trapped rabbit' but eventually proved to be just a 'puppet' (81), referring to Dr. Manmohan Singh.

Her clever ripostes avoiding direct references exploiting her gifted talent in literature is evident as the story progresses from misfortune to misfortune. An extract

from the novel of how the proponents of eugenics in an Indian context retaliated against a section of people for burning sixty Hindu pilgrims alive on their way from Ayodhya where the pilgrims had gone to lay foundation stones for a grand Indian temple where the Babri Masjid once stood:

A weaselly 'unofficial spokesperson' announced unofficially that every action would be met with an equal and opposite reaction. He didn't acknowledge Newton of course, because, in the prevailing climate, the officially sanctioned position was that ancient Hindus had invented all science. (45)

And then the kicker follows that feels like a merciless hit to a concerned conscience. "The 'reaction', if indeed that is what it was, was neither equal nor opposite" (45).

The novel, which is also a companion piece to her non-fiction works finds an even deeper understanding in her essays, which were actually busied interventions trying to capture attention to a waning problem. She says, for instance in the well-documented essay *democracy* (without a capital 'D'):

Last night a friend from Baroda called. Weeping. It took her fifteen minutes to tell me what the matter was. It wasn't very complicated, only a friend of hers, Sayeeda, had been caught by a mob. Only that her stomach had been ripped open and stuffed with burning rags. Only that after she died someone carved 'OM' on her forehead. Precisely which Hindu scripture preaches this?

Our Prime Minister justified this as part of the retaliation by outraged Hindus against Muslim ‘terrorists’ who burned alive fifty-eight Hindu passengers on the Sabarmathi express in Godhra. Each of those who died that hideous death was someone's brother, someone's mother, someone's child. Of course they were. Which particular verse in the Koran required that they be roasted alive?

The more the two sides try and call attention to their religious differences by slaughtering each other, the less there is to distinguish them from one another. They worship at the same altar. They're both apostles of the same murderous god, whoever he is. (265, 266)

After having witnessed the violence of the Gujarat riots live and was spared only due to “butcher’s luck” (63), it is the exasperation of a yearning and obsessed foster mother who cannot conceive that is evident when Anjum teaches her adopted daughter from the streets to recite the Gayatri Mantra. There is a forewarning for all of us when she says by way of an explanation. “It’s safer like this. Gujarat could come to Delhi any day. We'll call him Mahdi” (48). ‘She’ even changed ‘her’ daughter's gender. Easy to see why considering her experience conferred knowledge. What is not easy to digest is the extent to which she had to go to choose between the two herself and denying that choice to her daughter.

Sans any accolades, the novel is bound by a single quote at the back. “How to tell a shattered story? By slowly becoming everybody. No. By slowly becoming everything” (436). In a reading session she explained that it was a reference to ‘Kathakali’ a classical dance form that has its origin in Kerala where the artist narrates a story by being not just ‘anybody’ but also imitating ‘everything’ (KODX Seattle

34:55-36:40). Like the art form she must have wanted a story that does not require continuity but allows the reader to start off from where he wants to and still feels like he is part of it. Significantly, she also demonstrates the approach with which her novel should be read. It's necessary that we think holistically and strip off our human-centric psyche. The novel is not just about people but also about the “marmots and files and everything else on earth that is threatened and terrorized by the human race (Roy “The End of’ 2)” and about rivers and lakes that have been forced to change its course to construct a dam over it so that even drinking water can be charged and regulated in the name of national development exclusively for a mere small elite section that owns assets worth one quarter of India's GDP. “Guih Kyom” (435), the last chapter of the novel ends thus: “Everybody was asleep. Everybody, that is, except for Guih Kyom the dung beetle. He was wide awake and on duty, lying on his back with his legs in the air to save the world in case the heavens fell” (438). Perhaps if *The Ministry* has a hero then it is undoubtedly a dung beetle. (Excuse the usage of ‘a’)

The Jantar Mantar which used to be a public protest venue in Delhi is the “nerve center” (Roy 2018) of the book from where a baby, who was “the colour of night” (116) first appears. Like every other character in the novel, this little creature also acquires a mysterious prominence. Perhaps the baby, “the antithesis of Christ” (Roy 2018) is Roy's vision of a future that is imperfect but negotiable. Named Miss Udaya Jebeen, Miss Jebeen the second, she is a classic anachronism, a perfect reminder of the genuine mistakes the government had made at two of the most disturbed areas in the country – Kashmir, “the unfinished business of the partition of India” (“Kashmir is the”) in 1947 and the Maoist Naxal occupied forests of Andhra Pradesh. This is how the novel ends: “But even he (the dung beetle) knew that things

would turn out all right in the end. They would, because they had to. Because Miss Jebeen, Miss Udaya Jebeen, was come” (438).

Since it is highly unlikely that a Booker prize winner's work contains erroneous grammar one can only presume that she was insistent about the purposeful error to let the administration, and whoever it concerns, know about the radical path to be taken that might force them to rethink their notions about the established order. ('Miss Jebeen was come' is a phrase she has used elsewhere in the book too to point out that there is hope yet for the 'Evil Weevil World.) Or perhaps she simply wanted the reader to realise that, at the end of the day, no matter how wretched we feel ourselves as citizens, which a careful reader surely will, the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for a good person to do nothing. “So stand up and say something. Never mind if it's been said before. Speak up on your own behalf. Take it very personally” (Roy “The End of” 12). She wanted the message across. She made it dramatic and far-fetched. Justified.

One woman, three lovers and Kashmir occupies the heart of the novel. Roy, who had to face sedition charges because of her views on Kashmir's fight for independence makes her stance clear by genuinely trying to portray the story from a bureaucrat's, journalist's and a militant's point of view. The fact that the bureaucrat, although not officially, is a 'reformed' man in the end about the Kashmir issue points out what the author expects the administration to understand. Kashmir has a dangerous and mishandled history. It is necessary to acknowledge that. The plebiscite that was supposed to eventually decide what the Kashmiris really wanted never materialised. It was an emergency decision by the then princely ruler, Maharaja Hari Singh, Hindu king of Muslim-majority Kashmir to accede to the Indian union fearing

Pakistani tribes. Till date India has done everything wrong with this 'honeymooner's paradise'. We rigged elections and established army camps. "It has changed that valley into a little sort of puddle, a little pool of spies and informers and intelligence networks and torture chambers" (367). Musa, the militant says, "One day Kashmir will make India self-destruct. You may have blinded all of us, every one of us, with your pellet guns by then. But you will still have eyes to see what you have done to us. You're not destroying us. You are constructing us. It's yourselves that you are destroying" (433,444). Unless there is an honest discussion on what Kashmir really wants (need is already being discussed with abnormal fervour) this ticking time-bomb at the juncture of two nuclear equipped nations is going to be a concern for humanity at large.

Kate Gray, a critic remarks that Roy looks unflinchingly at poverty, human cruelty, and the absurdities of modern war; and somehow turns it into poetry. Stylistic peculiarities and word innovations make her work a remarkable one. A rough analysis of her metaphor patterns reveal a lot about her psyche. "Metaphors are not merely linguistic ornaments, but an expression of the structure of thought...Metaphors thus have not only instrumental value for self-reflection, anticipation and communication, but also an important function as mind settings, which influence our cognition of the self and the world" (qtd. in Moser 1,5). Comparing warplanes that thronged the Afghan sky after 9/11 to "unseasonal mosquitoes" (40) and "bombs that fell like steel rain" (40). TV reports about bomb blasts and terrorist attacks that proliferated like 'malaria' (42). Post liberalisation, the touch-up of old Delhi to become an economic and foreign investment hub of the nation is conveyed in a single sentence. "It was the summer grandma became a whore" (96). Or a question that speaks millennia, "What is the acceptable amount of blood for good literature" (283)? The 'Kashmiri-English

Alphabet for kids' post army invasion to learn the English language conveys a dystopic image. 'Honeymoon/Half-widows/Half-orphans' comes under 'H'. 'Militant', 'Misfire' and 'Mistaken Identity' comes together. 'Q': 'Questioning' and 'Quran' offers a grim image. The helplessness of Dr Azad Bhartiya, who also happens to share similar views as Roy is portrayed as, "The empty sleeve of his grimy striped shirt flapped at his side like the desolate flag of a defeated country" (125).

As a critic had reflected *The Ministry* talks more and shows less. It is like a manifesto of everything Roy. Sure it makes one reflect and contemplate. But it is too much negativity, too much loathing in binding. As one reads, one finds oneself grappling in a story that appears to make no clear head-away. It twists and turns and when least expecting, ends abruptly. Twenty-first century scenes show that what the founders of modern India had wanted is utopic. Perhaps, they dreamt too much and perhaps that was the intention too. To learn to achieve so much that there is no definite point of achievement so that what little we have achieved would be deemed an achievement. Everybody has borders and beliefs. Buddha has already happened. It's not possible for everyone to go about making sure of everybody else's well-being. Even Roy agrees to it that we sometimes tend to overlook the fact that Gandhi is yet another human being undeniably deserving the Nobel Peace Prize. If something makes Gandhi (born a high-cast, championed for Harijan rights and shot dead by a Hindu fanatic) any better than Ambedkar, (born a low-cast, championed against Dalit discrimination all his life and died a convert) it is the fact that Gandhi has/had an audience. This is what she says in the essay '*The Doctor and the Saint*':

History has been kind to Gandhi. He was deified by millions of people in his own lifetime. Gandhi's godliness has become a universal and, so

it seems, an eternal phenomenon. It's not just that the metaphor has outstripped the man. It has entirely reinvented him. Gandhi has become all things to all people: Obama loves him and so does the Occupy Movement. Anarchists love him and so does the Establishment. Narendra Modi loves him and so does Rahul Gandhi. The poor loves him and so do the rich. He is the saint of the status quo. (*Verso* ch.7)

If one starts thinking from an even broader perspective considering for purview a global picture, one finds that India is yet another normalcy. All the inhabitants of a niche does not enjoy the same priority. Some thrive at the cost of others. One problem gets solved only to be replaced by another one. Kashmir is at the whirlpool of a blatant power struggle. Even if the army decides to recede, the existing militant groups would go on a major power heist. Mr Biplap Dasgupta who is portrayed as a spokesperson for the government considers India 'a small corner of paradise' compared to "Kabul, or anywhere else in Afghanistan or Pakistan, or for that matter any other country in our neighbourhood (Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Burma, Iran, Iraq, Syria)... We have our troubles, our terrible moments, yes, but these are only aberrations" (147).

When the Indian army liberated Bangladesh, the good old Kashmiris called it – still call it – the '*fall* of Dhaka'. They aren't very good at other people's pain. But then, who is? The Bangladeshis whom we liberated are hunting down Hindus. The Americans are currently lecturing the Vietnamese about human rights. What we have on our hands is a species problem. None of us is exempt. (194)

It is essential we need to agree on certain facts. Democracy is the best bet we have. It just so happens that everybody is surplus people here. Like any other species we ensure among ourselves that only the fittest survive. Yes? No. It doesn't take one to be an intellectual to realise that with peaceful coexistence, harmony is indeed possible. The key is empathy. The ability to relate, to genuinely feel how it is to be in another person's shoes. In *The Shape of the Beast* Roy remarks, "Empathy would lead to passion, to incandescent anger, to wild indignation, to action" (*Verso* ch.1). She goes on to explain how empathy is different from concern. "Concern on the other hand, leads to articles, books, PhDs, fellowships" (*Verso* ch.1) While she does not undermine the impact of concern in bringing about injustices to the forefront she keenly demands the need to action. "Only the very young or the very naïve believe that injustice will disappear just as soon as it has been pointed out. But sometimes it helps to outline the shape of the beast in order to bring it down" (*Verso* ch.1)

The *Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is a platform on which falling characters who were failed by the establishment holds on to each other for survival. An estranged woman with a Kashmiri militant lover ends up in a graveyard guesthouse cum funeral parlour and finds renewed hope. A Dalit born influenced by the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein and who later converts to Islam is in the run to avenge his father's death caused due to lynching by a mob. In the end, he also ends up in the same place. He even marries the first foster child of the owner of the guesthouse to live a happy life. The owner is a transgender who has witnessed the Gujarat riots, who foster cares for another girl child whose mother was killed in a guerrilla operation in the North. Ruling out coincidences, the reader gets the impression that the characters have reached a destination where they deserve to be reached, 'Jannath' or paradise, the name of the graveyard guesthouse, away from the 'other world'. The novel

teaches us that, sometimes it is necessary that we ask the right questions to set our priorities right. But first, the novel urges that we need to have the nerve to start questioning.

CONCLUSION

Below are two comments that came on Arundhati Roy's Facebook account handled by her publisher after the publication of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*;

“Dear madam whenever u wanna a home in Kashmir, I have two and will definitely offer 1 of the two to u” (@M Amin Tantray).

“U r Witch. Indian government should be u put in jail” (@Dwarika Joshi)

The above two comments helps to put up the reception of Roy's second novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* into perspective. In 2002, the Supreme Court charged her with contempt of court and she had to pay a fine and serve a day in jail. In 2010, the Delhi Police charged her with sedition after she gave a public talk on Kashmiri independence. Many a times it is rather disappointing to see that the dissenters of her works are people who haven't actually read her works. They criticise her, accuse false charges against her, pelt stones at her house, and verbally abuse her because they are afraid of her voice. A voice that has a following. Because she could be heard and discussed. Especially in a country like India where Dabholkar, Kalburgi, Pansare and Gauri Lankesh were silenced with bullets, Roy is indeed a symbol of resistance.

Roy has always talked in length about the importance of language in a democracy. About how writers should not be domesticated. More importantly to speak when one has to, without fearing opposition. She is opposed to people calling her an author-activist. She feels it is like calling her a 'sofa bed'. “It suggests <that> writers should be in some nursery playing with their stuffed toys while the real world goes to work” (Nadiminti). She believes that it is a duty of a writer to act as a

spokesperson for the society. Writing with a social motive is a faulty statement.

Writing, for her is a social motive.

She states that her fictions are her arguments while her novel is a universe where conflicting viewpoints clash. It is like a thought process for her. To slacken the formality of sticking to numbers and facts that reduces the impersonal element from the story thus impeding in the ability of a reader to relate. She wants her reader to feel how it would be to live in an area termed by the provisions of the constitution as 'disturbed' and how normalcy is defined there. The novel points out how imperative it is to transcend the borders of caste and religion in the society. One has to rise above all the borders and beliefs to a peaceful coexistence. Throughout her polemical career she urges her readers to realise the roles we play and to reflect upon it. Each character in her novel has a lesson to teach. It is necessary that we get rid of the egoistical approach and understand our insignificance. Peace, coexistence and harmony might seem didactic terms but, in the long run, with continuous effort and incessant reminders she assures her readers that it is possible. She writes in her essay *The End of Imagination*.

The only dream worth having is to dream that you will live while you're alive and die only when you're dead.

"Which means exactly what?"

To love. To be loved. To never forget your own insignificance. To never get used to the unspeakable violence and the vulgar disparity of life around you. To seek joy in the saddest of places. To pursue beauty to its lair. To never simplify what is complicated or complicate what is simple. To respect strength, never power. Above all, to watch. To try

and understand. To never look away. And never, never. To forget. (Roy

15-16)

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