

Arundhati Roy, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. New Delhi: Hamish Hamilton/Penguin Books, 2017. 445 pp. ISBN 978-0-670-08963-5.

To have readers wait eagerly over a period of two decades for an author's second novel is an extraordinary phenomenon. But when the author is Arundhati Roy then this sustained curiosity becomes explicable. Roy shot into fame by winning the Booker Prize for her debut novel *The God of Small Things* (1997), a tour de force in post-Rushdie Indian fiction in English. Contrary to popular and critical expectation she then resolutely refused to write another novel, turning to non-fiction instead. Arundhati Roy reinvented herself in the avatar of an activist-writer, focussing attention on contemporary political events across the globe. In the last twenty years, Roy has emerged as a major dissenting, radical voice from India who has made scathing indictments of the State and Corporate nexus that has sustained itself by exploiting the country's human and natural resources and by brutally quashing people's resistances. If Roy has been feted amongst a section of the Left-liberal intelligentsia for her ability to speak truth to power, she has been equally reviled by the Right-wing, conservative forces which have on occasion even issued death threats. Hence, it is no surprise that the news of her return to fiction has created a stir, especially among readers who have remembered the magic of her first novel. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* bears the immense burden of this expectation and risks the dangers of failing that steep expectation of readers.

To write a review of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* almost six months after its publication is a hazardous venture since a review is necessarily meant to be an immediate critical assessment of a work of art. Yet, it is difficult to resist the temptation of writing a late response to Arundhati Roy's latest work which deliberately blurs the boundary between fiction and non-fiction creating a novel that constantly pushes against its own generic demands.

Unfortunately, it fails in exploiting the flexibility of the genre and bends it at the wrong places, revealing too much when silence is required and blocking the vision when more articulation may have been welcome. This results in a novel that, despite its fearless political position, becomes a caricature of the world that Roy has been analysing for the last two decades.

Even at the risk of sounding banal, it is possible to suggest that there are three sections in the novel. The first section, comprising the first six chapters takes a sweeping view of the developments in contemporary Indian history, connecting its various signposts – the Bhopal Union Carbide disaster, the massacres of the Sikhs in 1984, of the Muslims in the Gujarat carnage in 2002, the rise of the Hindutva, the drama of civil rights movements that centred around Anna Hazare and Arvind Kejriwal in Jantar Mantar and the tribal uprisings in Bastar. The second section – chapters 7, 8 and 9 – explores from multiple perspectives the issue of Kashmir's long struggle for independence, which has been variously dubbed separatism and militancy in contemporary discourse. In the final section comprising chapters 10, 11 and 12, the narratives of the first two sections are brought together to suggest an optimistic closure.

In terms of plot, the first section revolves around the life of Anjum, who is born a hermaphrodite to Muslim parents who had named their infant, Aftab. There are four events which transform Aftab-Anjum's life: her discovery of the Khawabgah (translated as The House of Dreams), a haveli of hijras of which she becomes a resident; her deep attachment to the orphan girl Zainab; her travel to Gujarat in 2002 where she faces the Hindu mob who spare her because s/he is a hijra; and finally, her decision to move away from the Khawabgah to Jannat – the graveyard. It is during her fantastic residence in the graveyard, reminding the reader of the real-life Mona-Ahmed, that Anjum meets Saddam Hussain, a Dalit young man who lost his father to the rage of the cow vigilantes, and is on a life-long crusade against the terror of Hindu Right. With its

bringing together of the Muslim hijra and the Dalit as unlikely companions in a graveyard, the novel becomes an exploration of a grotesque hybrid existence that the Indian state has forced on its own people.

No other writer has devoted more energy and attention to examining the contours of all the forces behind these events that have created new marginalities in India than Arundhati Roy. In a sense, the twenty years that she has given to these examinations were only a preparation for the writing, during the course of which she must have discovered numerous characters whose stories she has told and continues to tell in her compelling non-fictions. Her struggle was to find the right mode in which all these stories could be connected structurally and also shown as politically connected. Unfortunately, she fails to find a suitable resolution to this struggle and ends up writing a caricature of contemporary history, stripping it off its subtleties, refusing completely to historicise the events, and reducing the narrative to simplistic binaries of Duniya versus Jannat, dissent versus consent, democracy versus revolution and so forth.

Apart from some lyrical passages, the first part of the book offers no subtle accounts of the several plots of Indian history which moves like ridiculous pageant on its pages – “the lisping Prime Minister” and “Gurjarat ka Lalla” arousing no intellectual or political response in the reader except for disappointment with the predictability of the euphemisms (81). The transparency becomes jarring, especially in the long chapter that describes the grand democracy circus that gathers around the Jantar Mantar. The disjunction becomes more apparent when one finds that the subject of parody in the first part seems to be the ancestor of the sinister tragedy that unfolds in the second section. It is surely a bold assertion to place Gujarat 2002 at the centre of the major resistances in India and Kashmir, especially in these days when Hindutva has acquired an unprecedented legitimacy, but it is neither necessarily plausible nor a robust novelistic experiment.

The second section of the novel with three long chapters is arguably one of the most audacious pieces of writings on Kashmir, fictional by necessity, dark in patches, reliable and suspect at the same time. In Kashmir, as the narrative reveals, every person has at least two stories to tell, each contradicting the other and yet one can never be certain as to how to read them. A perfect instance of this is the gradual, layered unfolding of the tale of Amrik Singh, a major in the Indian Army posted in Srinagar in 1995 who relocates to California following the hue and cry over his gross violation of Human Rights. The officers of the Indian Intelligence Bureau fail to ascertain the cause behind the suicide of Amrik Singh, an event which remains shrouded in mystery as the various documents – official and personal accounts – jostle with each other as claimants of the reality of what happened. The chapter, which explores this elusive nature of truth is the first-person account of the bureaucrat Biplab Dasgupta who has earned the sobriquet of Garson Hobart and Biplab Das-Goose *da* among his friends and batch-mates – Nagaraj Hariharan or Naga, Musa Yeswi and S. Tilottama. The lives of each of these characters are entangled in the tragedy of Kashmir. That Tilo should love Musa, the fellow architecture student who becomes a Kasmiri militant, take recourse to the safe haven of marriage to Naga, the son of a top diplomat, and turn to Biplab in times of crisis, makes her a predictable enigma. Indeed Tilo, the daughter of a Dalit father and a Syrian-Christian mother, with her fragile beauty, her silence and her resilience, in her suffering and resistance, in her ability to nurture the future of revolution, suggests that Roy suffered from an immense authorial anxiety, that of moulding the female hero in her own public image – that of the beloved anarchist.

There are some brilliant moments in this section when Biplab's intellectual probing does actually point to the moral ambiguities of the Indian state's position on Kashmir and, occasionally, also that of its moral adversaries. These moments, rare also because they transcend the novelist's burden of her own political convictions,

provide some of the most serious reflections on Kashmir and must be read for their own philosophical and ethical content. The Indian State's shrewd bureaucracy and the hollowness of its brutal military exercises both jostle for space in the ethical imagination of the reader pressing her to revisit one of the most urgent geopolitical crises of our times.

In the last section of the novel, Roy attempts to tenuously weave the life of the two protagonists, Anjum and Tilottama, as the latter moves to the graveyard to run a school. Despite its optimistic, upbeat political possibility, the chapters falter inasmuch as its politics falters. It brings all the protagonists to one place: the Jannat or Paradise of the graveyard, the place for all who have been rejected by Duniya, the Weevil Devil World. For a novel that seeks to tell the stories of *all* the marginalities produced under the shadow of jingoistic nationalism, majoritarian state, and global capital, its closure seems a fairy-tale wish-fulfilment. That Anjum (the Muslim hijra), Tilottama (the Dalit woman), Musa (the Kashmiri Independence seeker), Saddam Hussain (the Dalit Hindu) and Miss Jebeen (the Second) (the dispossessed tribal girl-child from Bastar) – should all find their haven in the Jannat of the graveyard seems to be a failure of the author's imagination. The novel remains, like Roy's long non-fictional trajectory, a work of fierce defiance against what she considers the Hindu, hegemonic state but fails to offer any subtle examination of the many human tragedies that the state has produced over the last twenty years. Unlike her first novel and the non-fictions that follow, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* does not arouse any empathy for the marginalities that she so painstakingly creates. Arundhati Roy fails to write the one truly magnificent political novel that the current times desperately needs, the novel that possibly only she could have written.

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