

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness

Arundhati Roy 2017. India, UK: Hamish Hamilton by Penguin Random House India, U.K. Edition Penguin Random House, 445 pages, £14.99/₹599

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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 marginalised, 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 favourite. 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

declared” (please insert page no for this quote. I guess it is a quote from the book).

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 male-ness at birth. They are known as *Hijra* derived from the Semitic Arabic ‘hjr’ meaning ‘leaving one’s tribe’. They live in tightly knit organised 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.

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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. Though debatable, it serves as a warning!

Arundhati's language is superb, poetry in prose. With her skilful 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 labourers 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 and yet is it?

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 outcastes and 'Duniya' or the so called 'normal' world. She weaves a rich and

colourful 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! Arundhati has taken on this mammoth task of presenting to her readers, this complex nation with all its conflicts, as an advocate for the marginalised and the outcastes of the society, ecological degradation, the tribals or the Adivasis, human rights violation and for peace in Kashmir, skilfully narrated using dualities and symbolism.

Cultural Anthropologists, Sociologists, Political scientists, Activists, Writers and others would readily recognise 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 socio-political activist. Would a reader new to Indian reality be able to understand the intricate relations between its contradictions? Would it have been received with the same eagerness and acclaim had it been written by anyone else other than Arundhati Roy?

Like the country India, either you love the book or you do not but you cannot remain indifferent to *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*.