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A CRITICAL REVIEW OF *THE MINISTRY OF UTMOST HAPPINESS*

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ABSTRACT

Arundhati Roy's second novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* contains a story which knits together the humane aspects of existence with intrigues of love, politics, and also substantial amounts of tragedy and suffering. In the light of its close reading of Roy's novel, this paper will argue how it explores and engages with the larger political history of contemporary India with a special focus on the conflict in Kashmir and aims to bring the identities of the other to fore while also overlooking some crucial aspects of it. In doing so, as the paper will further point out, how the author seems to have clearly blurred the lines when it comes to the classic dichotomy between the "aesthetic" and the "political" as the novel is too overt about its topicality.

Keywords: Arundhati Roy, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Fiction, History, Other, Politics, Kashmir, India.

In her novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, originally published in June 2017, Arundhati Roy traverses the borderline between political and aesthetic in very vivid terms. She is blunt about the palpable political messaging of her narrative. It is something that John Keats or those who favour "art for art's sake" would not have been too proud of. When writing fiction of historical and political kind, writers often appear to be grappled by the binary of 'historical topicality' and 'literariness'. However, critics often seem to overplay this debate. What is essential in fiction in general and political fiction in particular is how it engages with the dialectic of reality and creates its "topicality" and "literariness" out of that. The much contested debate of the relationship between Literature and History dates back to the classical times. Beginning with Aristotle, there have been constant efforts to identify the links and natures of these two domains of knowledge. In the traditional scholarship, History was often regarded as an art of particulars, while on the contrast, Literature was identified with universals. As Aristotle states in his *Poetics*:

For a historian and a poet/writer do not differ from each other because the one writes in verse and the other in prose...But they differ in this, that the one speaks of things which have happened, and the other of such as might have happened. Hence, poetry/literature is more philosophic, and more deserving of attention, than history. For poetry/literature speaks more of universals, but history of particulars. But universal consists, indeed, in relating or performing certain things which happen to a man of a certain description, either probably or necessarily [to which the aim of poetry is directed in giving names]; but particular consists in narrating what [for example] Alcibiades did, or what he suffered. (9:1)

What this implies is that Historian could speak only of what has happened in the past while the poet speaks of what could or might happen and so could deal more with universals. At a broader level, the role of imagination and language are the focal points which History shares with Literature. It is also obvious that whatever be their differences, both deal with people, relationships, families, events, communities, societies, nations and mankind. Both partake of the specific ideological positioning of their creators while endeavoring to offer a peek into reality or as Hubert Royster puts it in his essay *Literature and History: A Comparison and Contrast*, "together literature and history are joint manifestations of learning and culture" (131) which implies that History as well as fiction aim to present a reality which gives insights into understanding the society and humanity in a better way. Also, the reader-writer relationship is one more common denominator between them.

Literature also 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. In the novel, Arundhati Roy characterizes life in India in the wake of the partition through the eyes of two characters: Anjum, born as Aftab, a transgender woman, and Tiltotma, a trained architect who journeys to the Kashmir region to reinvigorate her love affair with Musa, a militant. As the narrations move back and forth, there are many other characters as well who form part of a dazzling narrative which navigates some of the darkest and most violent episodes of modern Indian history, from government initiated neoliberal measures that dispossessed poor farmers to the Gujarat riots, rise of religious nationalism, and of course, Kashmir conflict. The narrative spans across decades and locations, but its main settings are Delhi and Kashmir. The characters like Anjum, Musa, and the events captured in the novel give an idea into the hegemonic nature of the project of the State based on the notion of authoritarianism. In other words, this kind of a relationship between the State and these "subjects" is based on the dichotomy between "Self" and "otherness." In this relationship, the dominating Indian state constitutes the Self while the marginalized identities constitutes the Other. In the words of Cahoone, the foundation for this is that what we perceive as "cultural units", that is, "human beings, words, meanings, ideas, philosophical systems, social organizations" can only remain in their apparent state through an "active process of exclusion, opposition and hierarchization" (16). This construction of "exclusion and hierarchization" is usually accomplished through innumerable cultural processes, mostly through historical expressions. It is here that Arundhati Roy's novel seeks to expose these hegemonic processes and expressions.

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. In her works, fiction and non-fiction alike, she seems to have appropriated what Salman Rushdie wrote way back in 1984: "If writers leave the business of making pictures of the world to politicians, it will be one of history's great and most abject abdications...there is a genuine need for political fiction, for books that draw new and better maps of reality, and make new languages with which we can understand the world...we see that it can be as false to create a politics-free fictional universe as to create one in which nobody needs to work or eat or hate or love or sleep." (*Outside the Whale*;1984).

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.

Having amply reflected 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 faultlines 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—which the Kashmir conflict/issue/tragedy is all about ethnic Kashmiri Muslims because it is they who take the centre 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. This is a contradiction or “gap”, to put it in the Derridean terms, which belies the narratives’ own assumptions about the Kashmiri reality.

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