

BOOK REVIEW

Vol. 4. Issue.4., 2017 (Oct-Dec)

ISSN

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

A BOOK-REVIEW OF ARUNDHATI ROY'S *THE MINISTRY OF UTMOST HAPPINESS*

MOSSA SOHANA KHATUN

M.A. in English Literature and TESOL,
Adjunct Lecturer of English Literature and Language,
Department of English, Northern University, Dhaka, Bangladesh



MOSSA SOHANA
KHATUN

Arundhati Roy, the Booker Prize-winning author of *The God of Small Things*, came up with her second novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, in 2017 after a long interval of twenty years. "Fiction takes its time"- this was her response. Roy's apprehension is inaccurate, yet plausible at the same time. It is inaccurate in the sense that a work of fiction is supposed to originate from the writer's imagination, and it does not usually take years. On the other hand, Roy's realization is tenable because she did count on imagination, but waited for the story to unfold gradually over time since she does not merely tell a story. Rather, she gives a meticulous account of India's political history mostly. The novel reads as if Roy has been inspecting and documenting the life-journey of Anjuman, the *hijra* as s/he lives through the political and religious turmoil in the twentieth and twenty-first century India. The story is frequently punctuated by minute details of Indian history- predominantly political and religious. This is why the readers might encounter the dilemma whether they are reading a novel or a book of state politics. Sometimes, the amount of details is so distracting and overwhelming that it goes to the extent of spoiling the canonical standard of fiction by dissolving the boundary between fact and fiction. The readers often lose themselves in the multitude of factual details and have to go back to the last stream of the actual story to stitch it to the next from where it starts again.

The novel consists of twelve chapters entitled "Where Do Old Birds Go to Die?", "Khwabgah", "The Nativity", "Dr. Azad Bhartiya", "The Slow-Goose Chase", "Some Questions for Later", "The Landlord", "The Tenant", "The Untimely Death of Miss Jebeen the First", "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness", "The Landlord" and "Guih Kyom". It starts with Anjum already settled at the graveyard. Soon after, it returns to her days in Khwabgah, the resort exclusively belonging to the transgender as their safe-zone. Throughout the first four chapters, the readers are introduced to one of the shocking and unnerving subject-matters of the novel where it deals with an almost ruled out domain- the domain of the *hijra*- the transgender. The moment readers come to the lines where Anjum's mother found "nestling underneath his [Anjum's] boy-parts, a small, unformed, but undoubtedly, girl-part", they are shocked to have apparently discovered that the protagonist (until Chapter-7) is a *hijra*. Roy mercilessly flings the invariably discounted phenomenon of the *hijra*'s life at our face which we have so long repudiated either out of fear of the unknown and, to a great extent, the forbidden or 'let-them-be' attitude by denying their existence on the whole. Roy seems to have closely observed the adversities, disgrace and hatred they confront in the society of 'normal' people and recounted them in her novel. It is in the third chapter that Miss Jebeen, the Second emerges into the scene as the seed of hope and the dot at the

center that Roy's prototype of the unified world circumscribes. This chapter, along with "Dr. Azad Bhartiya", also broadcasts the upheaval in Jantar Mantar, a common platform for people from all religions, castes and political groups to demonstrate against the oppression they faced from the government and its allies. The revolts of tribal people, the Gujarat massacre, the Bhopal tragedy, and the outrageous revenge against the Sikhs for Indira Gandhi's assassination, the unstoppable encroachment of cities engulfing the habitats of the poor, and the ruthless mass killing in Kashmir altogether make their space in these chapters. Roy calls forth politics, religious clashes, deprivation of the marginalized, Kashmir insurgency, rapid aggression of modernity, criticism of media and other forms of anarchy that are ubiquitous in the present India. Her bitter sarcasm on politics- how 'Gujarat ka Lalla' capitalizes on the Hindu-Muslim riots and gradually turns into a dictator- is barely camouflaged. She also expresses her concern about the way history is misconstrued and rewritten turning Muslim history of bravery into that of warmongers and unlimited bloodshed, for example.

Roy's prudent observation does not overlook the opportunist role of the media in capitalizing and recapitalizing on the grief and despair of the oppressed and helpless people. The falsehood of media broadcasting their fabricated and spurious news about Kashmir has left the outsiders with the impression that it is merely an enthralling tourist spot waiting to be explored with all its beautiful lakes, house-boats, snow-covered mountain-ridges and orchards full of healthy, savory fruits. This explains the cheerful comments of the "pencil-thin school girls" who are alarmingly oblivious to the loss of the relatives of the martyrs-

"Oh wow! Kashmir! What funnn! Apparently it's completely normal now, ya, safe for tourists. Let's go? It's supposed to be stunning"

"The Landlord", along with the following two chapters, entertains the readers with a love-story- Tilo and Musa's unabated feeling for each other; Biplob, the landlord, pining over his unstated and insatiate love for Tilo; and Naga's desperate attempt to make Tilo stay with him in a fashion of grasping sand in a grip- the more he tightened his grip, the more she slipped away. This love-story is premeditatedly pervaded with the reality of Kashmir insurgency. She has brought into light the actual horrifying picture of how innocent people on both sides were butchered to keep the Kashmir issue alive to serve the Indian army and bureaucrats' own interests.

The Jannat Guest House replicates a miniature of Noah's Ark which houses a gathering of people from different religions and faiths, with different ideologies and philosophies and also a variety of animal species. Roy has created this imaginary utopian world as an abode to people from every birth and belief where they can live happily and peacefully. However, her dream of a similar India is contrasted by Musa's prophesy about the imminent destruction India is going to face. The self-destruction is inevitable as Miss Jabeens will always be reborn to remind India things she had done to Kashmir. The resurrection of a new peaceful Kashmir will sprout out of the carcass of India. Thus in the last two chapters, Roy seeks temporary solace in the Jannat Guest House while awaiting the resurrection. Hence, "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness" comes into being.

Nevertheless, an unequivocal conclusion of such subject-matters would be impractical because the problems are still reverberating in India. It tells the shattered stories of shattered places, people, and animals. It tells the story of Kashmir suffocating and being torn into bits in the middle of Indo-Pak wars, of Anjum's soul entrapped between the 'boy-part' and the 'girl-part' and of the dying vultures, flying foxes, street-dogs, homeless cats, old cows, feeble horses, lame donkeys, chemically inflated goats and entangled crows leaving the matters unresolved. Above all, it tells the story of a chaos-ridden India. The end is yet to come. The resurrection is only anticipated.

The Ministry of Utmost happiness is not a sole apprenticeship of imagination; rather, it is a joint feat of both imagination and reality. Everyone who has a sophisticated taste for literature and is enthusiastic about Indian political and religious history should read it at least once since it offers a pleasant reading with the features of fiction as opposed to the tedious prosaic nature of textbooks on politics of India.

[Roy, Arundhati. (2017). *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. India: Penguin Random House India. ISBN: 9780670089635. Pages: 1-438, Price: Rs.799]