

8ICLICE 2017-111 Nazia Hasan

Arundhati Roy and New Inscription on Autumn Leaves

Nazia Hassan
Aligarh Muslim University
India
naziahasan.wc@amu.ac.in

Abstract

New writings hold new truths and new hopes, as well. Arundhati Roy proves that once more. The God of Small things to The Ministry of Utmost Happiness weave an India and the world from North to South, from little joys to big agonies, small acts to huge rewards, grand shows to petty hearts...She once again speaks of the subalterns, the subjugated, the dismissed and the obliterated, the blinds and the hide-outs how the fists of resistance do not come down, the wish for rights, the dreams for dignity do not dim even as they bleed and endure like trees would treat witherings and autumns. Her works speak of high born 'laltains', the low born 'mombatties', the nowhere persons called eunuchs, orphans and the disowned; while worrying over drying river beds, dying birds and poachings rampant: she at least, wakes one up to the world! That's the new writing which gives space to the unsaid and sheds light on the unrevealed. The history house doors are opened, the worm cans of Kashmir Military camps and Militant hide outs which indulge in something similar, the difference being the intention only which is a hair line one. We hear Dickens to Spivak in these new inscriptions. If Aftab is Anjum, then Anjum is the people called India, people called the world who are divided over caste, class, colour and deformity which no person inflicts on oneself. He/ she is the man/woman who is oppressed and yet builds up a world out of ruins. Her living in the graveyard, sleeping and waking up on graves of her blood relations is the metonymy for Kashmir- the burning paradise where people do not die; they are either killed or shoveled up to darkness and anonymity, while the living also die a hundred deaths every now and then. Solace is the new holy grail!

Keywords: Fiction, facts, violence, politics, subaltern, rights

Introduction

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness comes as a surprise in many ways. It hardly makes anyone happy in the usual sense, the irony is stark and biting. But, yes it does underline the subtlety of happiness that can be achieved by being open hearted and rising above narrowness. No second book has enjoyed so much anticipation as did *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, people compared it to all the long awaited things and events, even to the birth of a prince! If you know the anecdote of the great Akbar Badshah's arduous tarry, virtuous deeds and sacrifices to get a male heir apparent, you'd understand (Eraly:2000). Arundhati Roy wince when she flung this work to the world, under the refrain of expedient imminence, calling it a "shattered story"? Possible. The world had waited with bated breath and ears pricked up!

So, it comes as a mixed bag, with a motley group of characters from all walks of life, with thoughts which stumble and flow on a wobbled surface across the major events of the Indian subcontinent in the last twenty years. One might say, this novel is un-mysteriously 'handcuffed to history' (Rushdie:2005) and politics! Very much like the Shelleyan 'wild West wind', it 'rouses the winged seeds' (Shelley:1994) of

contention and conflicts patted to lie cold and low, unattended and ignored for years which unfolded in and around us but we passed them by. Arundhati Roy looks them up and down and weaves them in some unforgettable tales, some of these light up that déjà vu sense also; for during this long fictional silence, Roy had not been quiet. It was a very conspicuous void frequently punctuated with her vociferous prose of essays and articles. Her works continued challenging us, forcing us to ask ourselves new questions even as they offered guidance; she has dared us to think for rejuvenation of our own selves. Technically, her latest work fits as an ally of the *Midnight's Children* published in 1980, splurging in details, chronicling decades, looking into the 'historicity'/ factuality of events and 'textuality' (Montrose:1992) of facts proffered by all sorts of media to general public.

While Jerry Pinto expected it to be 'a chamber of Orwellian horrors' (2017), he takes a long breath before saying that 'Roy wants it all', she wants to put everything she's got into this one book: 'everything, all of India', the starving of Urdu, the fading of Sanskrit, the *hijra* community, the Bhopal gas tragedy, the Anna Hazare moment, the rise of the saffron brigade, Ayodhya and Godhra and prime ministers, past and present, the North-East, *gau rakshaks* and Dalit politics. "This is fiction as kaleidoscope, constantly changing, and flirting with failure. I don't think many writers have the chutzpah to try" (Pinto:2017). It is a populous book with god's plenty and man's destruction sprawled over all.

Roy's choice of Aftab/ Anjum as the central motif comes as no surprise for she has stood with everyone frail and unheard throughout her world known career, who refuse to be "written out," who understand that the tiniest breach in history, like "a chuckle," of all things "could become a foothold in the sheer wall of the future" (MOH:51)." Her narrative is recounted in the minority discourse, indulging in a much needed counter culture of innovative writing with more attention to details, with more empathy.

Thus, the central character is a *Hijra* in Indian terms, a eunuch, a person born a boy with the heart of a woman, a mother- conjures the life of confusion which has been the most representative aspect of modern and post-modern society. Thus, Anjum/Aftab becomes a metaphorical being, personifying many things simultaneously. Through her, Roy announces to deal with, stand with all those issues of society which may be gross, unwanted, unexpected, subaltern and pushed to the margins. Very much like what she did in the first novel, *The God of Small Things* (1996)- showing the world through the young twins Rahel and Estha, with all the childish wonder and wisdom. That makes it obvious enough that Roy rebels against the mainstream form of writing.

If Aftab was teased for his effeminate voice and feminine walk, made to feel upset about what he was; "he is a she or he?" (MOH:12), Rahel and Estha in *The God of Small Things* question the touchability issue; why certain things and persons are touchable where as some others are not? Why has social inequality been institutionalized in the caste system for centuries?(Roy, 2002:139). *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* bears an interrogation of sectarian violence at its core, the reasons of its constant presence in the form of rumour, whisper, fear and reality. It never ends. It also engages with queries whether corporatization of farms, rivers, electricity and essential commodities is going to make India come out of the stagnant morass of poverty, illiteracy and religious bigotry? These interrogations reveal the psyche of not only the characters populating the novels but, are aimed at us also. It makes Aftab to finally abandon his normal, ancestral and parental home and join a clan of queers and exploited people in Khwabgaah- house of dreams. The same kind of restriction makes

the twin children to get drawn towards the untouchable *pravan* Velutha who was a master craftsman in spite of his mean birth.

God of Small Things deals with the power forms of government, Church, police, high class authoritarianism, class norms, caste norms, gender and age norms and how any threat to normalcy is taken as a challenge. Like Aftab/ Anjum's gender transgression and biological anomaly, Rahel Estha's two egged twinship is also looked down upon as is Ammu's failure to restore her marital bliss. Roy ironically deals with these matters of unclassified ambiguity in other aspects also, like the Banana jam and the newly found moth species which could not be classified clearly in any one section. Velutha's enigma was the same. He was born a pariah but had the skills, body and sophistication like that of a high born person which attracted not only the children but Ammu also, who was taught and made to practice propriety in every aspect of life. It's another matter that she happened to break away from norms, most of the times, especially in the matters of heart. Both her relations crossed barriers of class, religion and caste.

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness reveals Arundhati Roy not only as a novelist but also as a subconscious historian, a meticulous diarist, a journalist, a nature lover, an eco-feminist, environmentalist and along with a zest for life that shows in the irrepressible raconteur of humour caused by the irony of things big and small. As "no story can be told as if it is the only one"; (Berger: 2008) she persuades us to believe that desiring uniformity and symmetry in today's writings is like asking for the whole world to be one! The novel thus, serves an important purpose of filling gaps and shedding light on dark and hidden crevices of our world, suffused with tidings of each moment. But Roy expresses incredulity to these expose. The novel does not merely tell a story but brings alive many of those headlines and bulletin item which the readers might have taken as snatches of good news and great news few years ago. This writing seems to transgress the very fences around fiction and facts; in response to what Milan Kundera fears in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* and says that 'the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting' (Kundera:1996,04). She promotes polyphony and redefines given facts by destabilizing the received version of events, reverses the centre-periphery paradigm and exhibits the corrosive effect of all those corporate projects which have been celebrated in news channels as illustrations of massive development, insolent globalisation and enormous projects.

The Ministry, because of Anjum/Aftab, at once reminds one of Khushwant Singh's *Delhi: A Novel* (1990) in some ways. Singh carved out the pock-marked Bhagmati, the eunuch to present the palimpsest of Delhi since medieval age to the post-colonial, post Emergency India. He shows Bhagmati as an alter ego of the city Delhi, ravaged, razed and rebuilt time and again. Madhu Jain notes that in spite of the lurid kitsch and a rumbustious narration, the novel runs with a sad tinge (TOI:1990). Delhi in *Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is presented as 'a thousand year old sorceress with a Medusa skull of flyovers, secrets folded in the furrows of her loose, parchment skin', 'wrinkles as streets..with stories of love and madness, stupidity, delight and cruelty'...had to be "hidden under imported fishnet stockings, saucy padded bras and pointed high heeled shoes"...as if to make "grandma a whore" for resurrection! (MOH: 96). She had to be decked up as the super capital of the world's favourite new superpower India! Thus, the poor people, 'the surplus people' (2002:98) dragging Delhi behind are sent away to unknown, undeclared places to chisel it as Paris, by 'flattening' lives and 'histories' (2002:99) of the past. So, there's abundance of imported objects, luxuries and new life style which is exhibited as new India and

there's a self sown 'despair' (2002:99) which gets no sponsorship to be telecast! These concerns did not get attention only after the Booker Prize, rather even her first screenplay depicts those 'rough nuggets of incipient political process with all those questions...', she makes Radha mourn for the poor construction labourers' "babies growing up on cement heaps" and the budding architect is convinced about designing a slum area in the most practical manner for her dissertation (1988:35).

Peter Kemp found *Midnight's Children* taking up, "where *The Raj Quartet* left off..." (1992:216): I think Arundhati Roy boldly trails the same course in a more responsible manner through this novel. Thus, Anjum and her clan become chroniclers living in the grave yard- keeping track of the bustling life around, with an additional correspondent, S. Tilottama, who jumps in the fire of burning Kashmir in an enchanted and enchanting mode of love and revenge. She ambles across the danger lines in the persona of la belle dame sans mercy and usual beauty. She contributes to the romantic aspect of the fiction and helps the novel to tie the frayed and scorched ends! Both women help build up the world which breathes, lives and kills- beginning with Jahanara Begum to Mulaqat Ali who work hard and rely harder on God to cure Aftab's disease, the Khwabgah bears some colourful characters to add vice and humour, the high class clan of Delhi students surrounding Tilo like Musa, Naga, Harharan/Norman, Garson Hobart, David who become bureaucrats in future to control the Kashmir crisis. We feel as if everyone, even the crow and the beetle, the blind mare contribute and "everyone is a note in a sublime Bach fugue..." (Kundera, 1996:11). We also meet the real life politicians and statesmen in cordial company of business magnates and corporation owners who showed all the true intentions of making up a new India, a shining India. But their glow and glitter is dimmed when we reach within Kashmir houses mourning for killed or lost relatives, as half-widows and halved persons, and the Naxalite infested forests of Uttarakhand and restless North East. It starts reading like newspapers articles; but how many of us go beyond the headlines? Do we react or respond? By choosing this form, mixing diary to letters to newspaper cuttings and snatches of news bulletins, Roy makes it obvious that reality is stranger than fiction! Although, the saddest moments have given the sweetest poetry but when 'art draws you to politics', which is a most human response to misery and abuse, you can't spin out tales anymore! One can say that she is on the Arnoldian path, unable to fit in the art for art's sake philosophy. The very other seems the only Hobson's choice. No wonder, she introduces the readers to Mulaqat Ali who had a firm belief that 'poetry could cure' (MOH:15), he had a Urdu couplet ready for every riddling or joyous situation and sold the Elixir for soul drink. Sarmad Shah the poet, Hazrat of Utmost Happiness was worshipped as the Saint of the unconsolated, blasphemers among believers and believer among blasphemers (MOH:416). But those days are gone. Only 'non-citizens' (2002:144), 'illegal beings of the new India' like Ustad Kulsoom Bi, Bombay Silk, Razia, Bismillah, Mary, Saddam, Zainab and Anjum ever go to pray on Sarmad's grave. Innocence and simplicity are states of nostalgia now.

Roy plays with the cherished saying about Kashmir being 'the paradise on earth' which is inundated with bloodshed now, and Anjum names her graveyard abode as Jannat/Paradise. The fact is that 'in Kashmir, you can be killed for surviving' (MOH: 269) and 'Dying became just another way of living' ; 'graveyards sprang up in parks and meadows...out of the ground like young children's teeth' (MOH: 314). In the same way, when she writes of the Maoists' rebellion and their suppression by Indian army, the narrative reeks with blood, gore, untold cruelty to women and men, injustice but there is no end in sight.

Roy's narrative in the *Ministry* is a blend of opinions, observation, memory, interpretation and imagination- in a post-modernist mode. Political is personal now, interdependent and inter-effective, the post-colonial India is neo-colonised by the "new king" (2002: xiii), aptly named by John Berger, in the form of corporate globalization, foreign MNCs highlighted by the 'perforated sheet'/ screen (Rushdie: 1995, 09) of media. We are breathing media but are offered only half truths, amplified glimpses, bits and pieces manipulated. Today, we are persuaded rather than informed by such sources of news. To many, the socio-political developments look puzzling which will make a jigsaw history with many misplaced parts in future. Roy engages in a dialogue of this immediate past and present, hinting towards the horrific future we are moving to, fetching the distant incidents which are on the track of fast forgetfulness, and evanescence.

She can be read as giving a deconstructive view of local, national and international incidents, almost letting the Pandora's lid off, with a malice for all. *The Ministry* is a meta-fictional mimetic form of narration with a historiographic motive. Roy has seen how the new government has been intent on carving out new histories, how history texts are in the process of modification. She is wary that "past can be re-made" to suit personal purposes, using "memory as tool" (Rushdie, 1981:24). She has seen how "facts have been dropped out of memory in to crater of a volcano of silence" (1988:230). It is obvious by now what Kundera said in another context that powerful authorities "are ready to sell people a future in exchange for their past" (1996:20). She does not want facts to get petered as pickled memories what Saleem Sinai tried doing in *Midnight's Children* (MC:37). Ammu and Chacko have shown how raw fruits can't be preserved in bottles, they have to be dried out and spiced up with proper ingredients (GOST: 47), changing their originality. Edward H. Carr has also reiterated that facts depend on interpretations, or they are like raw fish which can be cooked in any way (1962:04). In the same way, facts of the present can lose primacy if not recorded and preserved now. The new history books are not going to be honest. Thus, she confides in papers, bleeds in blue, tries to shout out the truth kept away behind edited scripts and images. She "safeguards it against the corruption of not only the clock" (2006:38) but prejudiced narration as well, knowing it well that there's no 'Olympian Chronicler' (1977:12); neither is she the same but efforts go a long way. That she is aware of. Roy herself said a few years ago that there is "an intricate web of morality, rigour and responsibility that art, that writing itself imposes on a writer" (2002:134)

The two novels taken here for consideration pay the deserved obeisance to "the exquisite bond between the artist and the medium" (2002:134), run with a subplot of radical critique of development, resisting it and dismantling the intellectual underpinnings of the very bright and promising development enterprise. She gives glaring examples of its damaging, impairing cultural and psychological impact. They show how the all-embracing globalization extends commercial networks to hinterlands of poor countries, pushing forward blind economic growth in juxtaposition to global poverty, displacement and homelessness and infinite injustice, at the cost of stunted humanity and culture. She calls it a process of 'barbaric dispossession' (2002:139) on an unprecedented scale. We can see her predictions coming alive in the form of 'friends breaking spirit' (MOH: 269) because of political corruption and Hindu extremism, government and army becoming perpetrators of oppression, constitution turning to uniform civil code, rulers becoming saffronised, 'rivers turning poison, air into fire and our very earth into a foe' (Roy, 2002:5). How it leads us to fear living instead of dying (2002:09). Isn't Anjum's Jannat a replica of

the same at a distant metaphorical level? Isn't Kashmir going through the same phase for the last half century? Yet, we don't learn. Kundera says rightly that 'historical events mostly imitate one another without talent' (1996:18) but we indulge in an unprecedented experiment if we rebel against our own country, our own youths and young ones, our own beings.

Roy reveals how development is a socio-political process with ethnocidal features, a post-modern plague after colonization ended and globalization sprang up as a new fount of hopes for the hegemonic power, a new excuse to reshape the old world order. It has the same onslaught of a new civilizing mission with worse intentions. There's a fear towards this new social engineering which in the words of another serious thinker Ashish Nandy, "is threatening to take over all of human life, including every interstice of culture and every form of individuality" (1996:106).

But the courage to dream while sitting on the graves of the loved ones is an insanely brave effort. Roy's characters, making God's plenty with 'Noah's ark of injured animals' (MOH: 399) are an exemplum of that, celebrating the gift of life while away even from the margins of society. They are capable of combing out a jannat/paradise of their own. None of them is alike, there's no demand for similitude; yet it is an open, inclusive and tolerant place. They 'nurture the vulnerable' (Miller, 2017) rather than crushing them, empathise with each other across differences (Khair, 2017), seek joy in the saddest places, respect strength never power (2002:12), obliterating divisions of caste, religion or gender. They prove that "without realizing it, the individual composes his life according to the laws of beauty even in times of greater distress" (1984:49). They prove that the world was made to be lived in as an alternative of the heaven above, in spite of all to be borne.

References

- Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*, based on the BBC TV series, BBC and Penguin Books: London, 2008.
- Carr, E.H. "The historian and his facts", *What is History?* Macmillan and Co. Ltd, London, 1962
- Eraly, Abraham. *Emperors of the Peacock Throne : The Saga of the Great Mughals*. Penguin books: New Delhi, 2000.
- Ghosh, Amitav. *The Shadow Lines*, Orient Longman Ltd. New Delhi: 1988:230.
- Hasan, Nazia. "Midnight's Children as a historical event", *Journal of Faculty of Arts*, Vol.4, No. 1-2, Jan. 2005-Dec. 2006, ISSN 2348-9871.
- <https://www.acast.com/.../abc-the-ministry-of-utmost-happiness-by-arundhati-roy>
- Jain, Madhu. "Ribald Kitsch: Romp through Delhi's history" indiatoday.intoday.in › Magazine › Society & The Arts › Books
- Khair, Tabish. 'What magic reveals, what magic hides', www.thehindu.com/books/arundhati-roy...ministry...happiness.../article18910916.ece
- Kundera, Milan. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Trans. Aaron Asher, Faber and Faber: London, 1996
- Kundera, Milan. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Trans. By M.H. Heim, Faber and Faber: New York, 1984.
- Miller, Laura. 'To Overflow Every Division Between Human Being: Arundhati Roy's immensely rewarding *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*',

www.slate.com/.../arundhati_roy_s_the_ministry_of_utmmost_happiness_reviewed.htm

- Montrose, Louis Adrian. "A *Midsummer Night's Dream* and Shaping Fantasies of Elizabethan Culture: Gender, Power and Form", *New Historicism and Renaissance Drama*, Longman, USA, 1992.
- Nandy, Ashish. 'Science, Authoritarianism and Culture', *Traditions, Tyranny and Utopias*, Oxford University Press: New Delhi, 1988 -106
- Palgrave, F.T. *The Golden Treasury*, Oxford University Press : Calcutta, 1994
- Peter Kemp. *New Writings*, (eds.) M.Bradbury and J. Cooke, Minerva: London, 1992.
- Pinto, Jerry. 'Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is a hideous, beautiful story', www.livemint.com, Thu, Jun 01 2017.
- Roy, Arundhati. *In which Annie gives Those Ones* (The original screenplay), Penguin Books: New Delhi, 2003
- Roy, Arundhati. *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*, Penguin Books, Gurgaon, 2002
- Roy, Arundhati. *The God of Small Things*, India Ink: New Delhi, 1997 (referred to in abbreviation as GOST within the text here).
- Roy, Arundhati. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Hamish Hamilton:UK, 2017 (referred to in abbreviation as MOH within the text here).
- Rushdie, Salman. *Grimus*, Granada Publishing House, Herts, 1977
- Rushdie, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands*, Granta Books, London, 1981
- Rushdie, Salman. *Midnight's Children*, Vintage, UK, 1995 (referred to in abbreviation as MC within the text here).
- Singh, Khushwant. *Delhi: A Novel*, Viking: New Delhi, 1990