



Research Paper

## The Ministry Of Utmost Happiness: Roy's Attempt To Represent India's Struggle With Social Issues

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**ABSTRACT:** *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness depicts Arundhati Roy's attempt to bring all the castaways of the subcontinent under one roof. The novel clearly highlights her personal political stands based on the very idea of personal is political. She has tried to cover every possible theme from queer politics to Gujarat's 2002 pogrom, from violent casteism to neo-liberalism, from Emergency to Narmada Bachao Andolan and what not. In today's era when the words like 'secularism' and 'tolerance' are unwelcoming, Roy took charge to unmask the political and social fault lines of the Indian subcontinent. She conjures the story which is brutal but very similar to the reality. In fact, the novel seems to be a companion to his political writings namely, The Algebra of Infinite Justice (2001) and Walking with the Comrades (2011). Roy said in an interview in 2011, as she discussed returning to fiction, "I'll have to find a language to tell the story I want to tell. By language I don't mean English, Hindi, Urdu or Malayalam, of course. I mean something else. A way of binding together worlds that have been ripped apart" (Kumar). Thus the paper will highlight how Roy has interwoven the harsh realities of today with a fictional story. The research paper with reference to Roy's latest work of fiction aims at directing every resistance movement embodied in the characters of the novel and their struggles and forming a raucous community in general.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Arundhati Roy, castaways, Indian subcontinent, political and social fault lines.*

Received 09 July, 2018; Accepted 23 July, 2018 © The author(s) 2018. Published with open access at [www.questjournals.org](http://www.questjournals.org)

### Research Paper:

When Arundhati Roy won the Man Booker Prize in 1997, she was applauded for her extraordinary writing skills and of course her magical novel *God of Small Things* (1997). But more than appreciation, it received criticism for being overtly obscene for Indian audiences for her description of sexuality. But that didn't stop Roy. After receiving the award in an interview to 'The New York Times' as quoted by Parul Sehgal, Roy said that I chopped off my beautiful hair because she didn't want to be known "as some pretty woman who wrote a book" (Sehgal). She donated the entire prize money to Narmada Bachao Andolan. So for Roy it wasn't just writing that she wanted to do but she wanted to draw the attention of India's people towards the movements that needed to be addressed. For Toni Cade Bambara, an African-American author and a social activist, literature is the best medium to target the societal issues and problems and hence create awareness to the general audiences. She said, "A writer, like another socio-cultural worker, like any other member of the community, ought to try to put her/his skills in the service of the community". And Arundhati Roy had that clarity in her mind. She has always been reflective of her intentions without any hesitations. She always had a cry for the suppressed and marginalised and hence in her latest novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) she makes an attempt to bring all the castaways of the subcontinent under one roof. The novel clearly highlights her personal political stands based on the very idea of 'personal is political'. She has tried to cover every possible theme from queer politics to Gujarat's 2002 pogrom, from violent casteism to neo-liberalism, from Emergency to Narmada Bachao Andolan and what not. In today's era when the words like 'secularism' and 'tolerance' are unwelcoming, Roy took charge to unmask the political and social fault lines of the Indian subcontinent. She conjures the story which is brutal but very similar to the reality. The novel is a dedication to 'The unconsolated'. The novel divided amongst 12 chapters follows the life of two main characters namely, Anjum, a transgender, struggling to make her life in Delhi and Tilo, an architect who became an activist and her life revolving around the three love interests of her life. First and foremost issue that Roy took through her central character Anjum is that of transgender. In the first few lines of the novel Roy has hit hard with the reality when she writes, "She didn't turn to see which small boy had thrown a stone at her, didn't crane her neck to read the insults scratched

into her bark. When people called her names - clown without a circus, queen without a palace - she let the hurt blow through her branches like a breeze and used the music of her rustling leaves as balm to ease her pain.” (MUH 3)

Later upon asked by Imam that how the last rites of the transgender are performed. Are they buried or cremated. Who bathed their bodies, Roy pointed out the very fact that humans in Indian subcontinent has been conditioned so deep to follow a particular religion, gender and even sexuality that they have forgotten the basic fact that the humanity dies a hundred times with incidents like these. Anjum has a very brave and apt reply to this she says, “‘You tell me...You're the Imam Sahib, not me. Where do old birds go to die? Do they fall on us like stones from the sky? Do we stumble on their bodies in the streets? Do you not think that the All-seeing, Almighty One who put us on this Earth has made proper arrangements to take us away?’ ” (MUH 5). Like Anjum, who was born as Aftab, there are many others who struggled throughout their lives to make a living for themselves. They aren't just ignored for not belonging to any specified gender, rather, are targeted and mocked for their existence. Their own families disown them as was the case with Anjum, when her father Mulaqat Ali realised nothing can be done about her condition, he along with his wife Jahanara Begum decided to send her away to Khwabgah, a special place for people like her. These narrow mindsets of people make the life of people like Anjum even more difficult. Anjum had lived her life away from her home and created a new home for herself which had no knowledge of the outside world. So when 9/11 attacks happened in the New York city, she unlike everyone else put the blame on Saeeda, her co worker for putting up an evil spell instead of pointing fingers towards Osama bin Laden or George W Bush. After the attacks, Muslims became the prime target as they were held responsible for the acts of terrorism and the ruling government of India was thinking to declare India to be a Hindu nation just like Pakistan was a declared Islamic nation. Some of the government supporters even compared Muslims to the Jews of Germany and were staunch supporters of Hitler's ideologies. Many young Muslim boys were detained and were kept in prison for trial. These young men had to face the savagery of the officials just because they belonged to a particular religion and that made them the prime suspects of spreading terrorism. Later, When Anjum boarded the train to Ajmer to visit the Dargah; another incident of violence broke out with the burning of a train in Gujarat: “A railway coach had been set on fire by what the newspapers first called ‘miscreants’. Sixty Hindu pilgrims were burned alive. They were on their way home from a trip to Ayodhya where they had carried ceremonial bricks to lay in the foundations of a grand Hindu temple they wanted to construct at the site where an old mosque once stood.” (MUH 44)

This act of terrorism was believed to be performed by the Pakistani terrorists and hence hundreds of Muslims were arrested by Police in the name of terrorists from Pakistan. The then chief minister of Gujarat, “...appeared on TV in a saffron kurta with a slash of vermilion on his forehead, and with cold, dead eyes ordered that the burnt bodies of the Hindu pilgrims be brought to Ahmadabad, the capital of the state, where they were to be put on display for the general public to pay their respect” (MUH 45). The act of violence soon met with even more violent reactions as the killings went on for several weeks throughout the country. “The mobs were armed with swords and tridents and wore saffron headbands. They had cadastral lists of Muslim homes, businesses and shops. They had stockpiles of gas cylinders...the police were often part of the mobs, and once the mobs had finished their business, the corpses no longer resembled corpses” (MUH 45). With the chaos going on in the country, Anjum was missing too and was not in contact with anyone. Later, a character named Mansoor found Anjum in the male refugee camp and brought her back to Khwabgah. This incident changed Anjum completely as from being a cheerful person she became a very quiet and sad person. Later after shifting to the graveyard, Anjum used to talk to Zakir mian, whom she lost during the riots. She would tell the brutal words of the saffron army “Mussalman ka ek hi sthan! Qabristan ya Pakistan!” (MUH 62) These words were horrifying and remained with Anjum for many coming years of her life. With these events of India where humans were killed and were brutally tortured for their existence, Roy moved further to a new India who witnessed an old man standing against the corrupt India. “He had something for everyone. He electrified Hindu chauvinists...with their controversial old war cry, Vande Matram!...When some Muslims got upset, the committee arranged a visit from a Muslim Film star from Bombay who sat on the dais next to the old man...wearing a Muslim prayer cap...to underline the message of Unity in Diversity”(MUH 103).

He used to sip water from a Dalit's daughter's hands to calm the furies of Dalits and for military moralists he would ask the terrorists to be hanged. He was the man who was trying to occupy his space in everyone's heart as he was trying to bring all together under one roof against corruption. For the nationalists he went way too far as he gave slogans such as: “Doodh maangokey to kheer denge! Kashmir maangokey to chiir denge!” (MUH 103). Soon the country was standing against the corrupt government and many rallies and protests were taking place in the capital of the nation. Anjum along with Saddam and Ustad Hameed also went to one of the protest that was taking place at Jantar Mantar to witness ‘Second Struggle for Freedom’. Everyone was coming forward to showcase their struggle and trauma that they went through. The Association of Mothers who has lost their sons in the war for freedom in Kashmir came forward with a banner which reads:

*“The story of Kashmir*

DEAD = 68,000

DISAPPEARED = 10,000

*Is this Democracy or Demon Crazy?"*

*No TV camera pointed at that banner, not even by mistake. Most of those engaged in India's Second Freedom Struggle felt nothing less than outrage at the idea of freedom for Kashmir and Kashmiri women's audacity" (MUH 115).*

Roy has clearly pointed out the hidden agendas of those so called revolutionary protests because nothing came out of those rallies and protests. It all looked like a paid show because the victims remained victims and no one but the political readers took benefit of the entire situation. None of the issues were resolved and Roy made sure to depict these harsh realities of today's India through her fictionalisation of reality. The Association of Mothers was very disappointed and they were threatened and were named Muslim Terrorists. All through her life, Roy had been very clear and very open on the issues that needed to be discussed and addressed. It took 20 long years for her to come up with this beautiful piece of fiction but she made sure that those 20 years should be visible in her book. She set her novel in the present day India but has dealt with so many things which had lead India to its present state.

In the 7<sup>th</sup> chapter of her novel, after the simultaneous explosions torn the city, Tilo is introduced as an architecture student. Her background isn't really known as she has been described as: "...a girl who didn't seem to have a past, a family, a community, a people, or even home" (MUH 155). Even though she didn't belong to any particular community, this didn't stop Naga and Musa to have feelings for her. She was not a beautiful girl as per Indian's definition of beauty, she was poor, she lived in slums and yet she was special to these two boys. Naga was even insecure whenever he was around Musa because he thought Musa had better chances to win over Tilo. After their graduation Musa went back to Kashmir but later somehow both Musa and Tilo managed to stay together and got married to each other. It was the time of Kashmir being a war zone and Musa was a young man who died during the war. Musa was a militant. Soon after his death, Tilo married Naga. As the chapter progresses we witness the third person narration is from a person named Biplab Dasgupta, who had been in love with Tilo too but because of his Brahmin parentage never spoke of it. Later, Naga emerges out to be a spokesperson for the Leftists and Biplab couldn't understand him and his ideology. According to Naga: "*The falsehood of our 330 million mute idols, the selfish deities we call Ram and Krishna are not going to save us from hunger, disease and poverty. Our foolish faith in monkeys and elephant-headed apparitions is not going to feed our starving masses...*" (MUH 164). Roy in the form of Naga has represented today's young man who is more sensible and realistic than his ancestors. The man of today talks of reasoning and logic and that's what exactly Naga used to do. In a way, the glimpses of Roy herself are seen in Naga. Roy takes up the issue of nationalism and patriotism in the best possible way through the two different perspectives of Naga and Biplab who had been in love with Tilo once. Naga though more practical in his approach was more of an enthusiast as he never thought of the consequences of his words. Biplab on the other hand was very well aware of the present day condition of the country as he pointed out": "*People are being lynched for far less. Even my colleagues in the Bureau don't seem to be able to see the difference between religious faith and patriotism*" (MUH 165). Years went by and both Naga and Tilo got involved with the issues related to Kashmir so deeply that Tilo realised that she don't want to be with Naga anymore. Tilo, being a widow of the militant had so much anger inside her that she never gave any explanation and Naga couldn't understand exactly what made her to take this decision. Though as the novel progressed, Naga and Tilo got together but to be separated again probably displaying the conflict going through Tilo's mind. The dead body of Musa (which was unrecognisable) had made such an impact on her that all she wanted was to stand for Kashmir and that became the sole purpose of her life. Through Tilo's struggle, Roy depicted the horror that Indian Army has perpetuated in the lives of the people of Kashmir. The major part of the novel is set in Kashmir and the reason is, Roy wanted to take up the issue she has personally believed in. She has always stood for Kashmiris and hence the setting. She depicts the real scenario of Kashmir and the plight of the natives. She wrote:

*"Death was everywhere. Death was everything. Career. Desire. Dream. Poetry. Love. Youth itself. Dying became just another way of living. Graveyards sprang up in parks and meadows, by streams and rivers, in fields and forest glades...near the Line of Control, the speed and regularity with which the bodies turned up,...Some were delivered in sacks, some in small polythene bags, just pieces of flash, some hair and teeth"* (MUH 314).

The country has been witnessing this sad state of Kashmir but no solution till date has come to this problem. The countrymen who speak of peace and prosperity of the nation don't bother about this incredible part of the nation. For them Kashmir is something they don't want to stand for because apparently the slow death of the state of Kashmir doesn't bother them much. Along with this issue, an issue of untouchability has also been taken on the land of Kashmir itself. It was through a character named S. Murugesan, a soldier posted in the valley of Kashmir. He was from a 'chamar breed' as Kashmiris used to call him. And Roy even pointed out that how Dalits and other untouchable castes are treated in Northern India. When Murugesan died, his coffin

wasn't allowed to even pass through the village as the village didn't belong to the untouchables and hence had to take a different route to Untouchable's cremation ground. This depicts how insensitive and irresponsible Indians behave in such critical situations. Even though the village people were against it, the military, in order to give him tribute built a statue of him at the entrance of the village and nobody could come to the acceptance of the fact that how an Untouchable's statue be put up at the entrance. For most of them it was disrespect. By the time the novel reaches to its 10<sup>th</sup> chapter titled same as the title of the book, Tilo's life has been seen as a rollercoaster ride and finally the two central characters of the novel Anjum and Tilo are together in the graveyard where Anjum had shifted after leaving the Khwabgah. Later, Saddam was having a funeral for her father and Tilo wanted her mother Maryam Ipe's ashes to be buried too. Remembering her mother's last words in ICU, "*I feel I am surrounded by eunuchs. Am I?*" (MUH 413), Tilo was so shocked and couldn't believe the reality of those words. Towards the end of the novel, another movement saw its seeds being sown when Anjum in response to a letter wrote "*LAL SALAAM ALEIKUM...That could have been the beginning of a whole political movement...*" (MUH 426). The book is less of a novel but more of an offering, an offering to humanity, an offering to understand the reality, an offering to realise where we stand today and most importantly an offering to empathise. With the closing lines of the novel Roy gave us a ray of hope that today might be not what we thought it would be but tomorrow definitely has something for all of us. She wrote: "*...Gaih Kyom the dung beetle. He was wide awake and on duty, lying on his back with his legs in the air to save the world in case the heavens fell. But even he knew that things would turn out all right in the end. They would, because they had to.*" (MUH 438).

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Mariyam Ilyas Siddiqui "The Ministry Of Utmost Happiness: Roy's Attempt To Represent India's Struggle With Social Issues" *Quest Journals Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science*, vol. 06, no.6, 2018, pp. 21-24.