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Book-Review

The Goddess of Small Things:

Arundhati Roy's Dazzle in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

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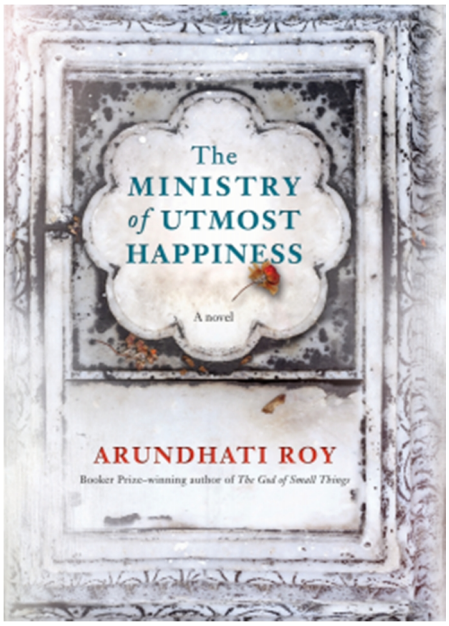

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness

Arundhati Roy

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From the maker of *The God of Small Things* and the 'Save Narmada' movement, the reader gets Arundhati Roy's second novel after twenty years. Beneath the strong underlying political message that this book is infused with, the novel is essentially a tale of utmost human compassion. The novel has two complex subplots. From being set in a down-to-earth neighbourhood of Delhi called Shahjahanabad which watches the birth and growth of Aftab (Anjum) into adolescence and middle age, the novel shifts to a neighbourhood in central Delhi and eventually into the valleys of Kashmir.

The beginning of the novel is rather gloomy. It starts with the transgender Anjum who has taken residence in a graveyard on the outskirt of Shahjahanabad after having left her

community for unknown reasons. Anjum is middle-aged and her only friend is the graveyard Imam who surprisingly gives her protection which enables her to ward off the unwilling attention of local goons. Chapter by chapter, Anjum's story unfolds as the reader gets to know about her gradual transformation from being Aftab to Anjum: how her mother wanted to go beyond the world of language when she discovered her baby was genderless because in her mother tongue Urdu—the only language she spoke—all things had a gender, except her baby. We get to know how Aftab despite his removal of girl parts, is drawn to the community of Khwabgah where he discovers others like him, after his discovery of someone called Bombay Silk in the city. So, despite Aftab's mother's offering at Hazrat Sarmad's shrine and his father's belief that the tendencies of which the local quack Dr. Nabi spoke, would not flourish in Aftab, the latter followed Bombay Silk one day into the intricate world of Khwabgah when he was fourteen and afterwards, became a permanent resident of that place. Aftab's life goes on and given a choice between manhood and womanhood, it takes him only three minutes to make his choice. Thus, begins her lifetime injection of cheap hormones prescribed to her by Dr. Mukhtar who gives her a fake vagina which is more of a source of discomfort than pleasure to her.

The residents of Khwabgah are an isolated community but they are intertwined in a complex way with society. They have to go outside the boundaries of Khwabgah—their known world of comfort—to carry on their daily business. There is a TV here as well which gives them access to the happenings of the socio-political world outside. This is 2000 and with the fall of Twin Tower in New York, India too begins to change in ways previously unthinkable. We are told about the rise of Narendra Modi, called 'Gujarat ka Lalla' whose encouragement to the rise of Hindu nationalism results in a riot in Gujarat in which Anjum finds herself in the train trying to go there for a religious pilgrimage, seeking blessings for her adopted daughter Zainab. The reader gets to know only later that all men and women on that train were butchered or raped except Anjum whom the Hindu nationalists refused to kill because that was supposed

to bring in bad luck. Anjum discovers that she only can bring 'butcher's luck' (66). With this discovery and with Zainab's detachment from her during the period she was away, Anjum develops an aversion to the world she used to love so much. But the 'duniya' is also no longer a place to which she can return and as a result, she settles on the outskirts of Shahjahanabad in the graveyard. Gradually, she develops her Jannat guest house and funeral services—services to bury those whom society has rejected in life as well as death, like prostitutes.

It is at this point that the novel takes an interesting twist and we are introduced to the enigmatic S. Tilottama. Her mother was a Keralite social worker who had her outside wedlock as a result of which Tilo grew up as her own mother's adopted daughter. That lifestyle leaves a permanent scar on her psyche. We get first introduced to her through the reminiscences of her friend Biplab Dasgupta who reveals to the reader of his endearing love—along with that of two other men—for Tilo from the time they were college sweethearts. But time has flown with Dasgupta being now a government official, his friend Naga a prominent journalist and Musa who hails from Kashmir turning into an underground freedom fighter for the *azaadi* of Kashmir after his daughter and wife are killed. The novel reveals how after more than thirty years, the lives of the four get interwoven after Musa gets supposedly killed. And it is only through the narration of Tilo herself that we know that such is not the case: how she remains in touch with Musa her college sweetheart, throughout the years and who tells her how he has taken up arms against the provocation of one Major Amrik Singh after the killing of his family. The novel is essentially a tragedy of modern times. We get to know that this Amrik Singh isn't spared his fate either. He commits suicide after having killed his own son and wife in the States after having sought political asylum there but being unable to escape the eyes of the families whose members he killed through torture in the infamous interrogation cell, Shiraz cinema hall in Kashmir.

But ultimately, the novel remains a tale of endearing love. The reader is revealed how with ease, Musa is able to empty his heart to Tilo because '…they trusted each other so peculiarly that they knew…that whoever it was that the other person loved had to be worth loving' (368). So even though Tilo has a baby with the man she loves, she decides not to keep it because of her own traumatic relation with her mother. But this doesn't stop her from rearing the child she finds stranded at Jantar Mantar—a platform for holding non-violent protests against various types of corruption in the heart of Delhi. It is only fit that Tilo who refuses to bear biologically the child of the man she loves—a freedom fighter or a terrorist, depending on who is looking at this—ends up kidnapping a found baby whose mother is a Maoist rebel and father, six unidentified policemen. And names the baby after the freedom fighter's dead baby with another woman. In a way, the baby is the most appropriate heir to Tilo's freedom fighter friend. It is also not irrational that the baby should be brought up, away from the *duniya* with all its conflicts that the baby's mother faced, by a group of *hijras* (transgenders) who give the baby absolute love and protection. This is where the world of Anjum and Tilo meets. Roy has an astounding understanding of the depth of human emotions, the most powerful of which is love between a baby and a woman and secondly, love between a woman and a man. Roy does not bring up the issue of love between the same gender (which is hotly contested all over the world currently) although she is very close to doing this by making her other key protagonist, a *hijra*.

But what Roy has done with language or rather, how she has broken through the barriers of language, is astonishing. Like her transgender protagonist, the language she uses is transgender as well if there is any such category of language. From the use of Urdu *shayari* and ghazals to using Urdu obscenities commonly heard on the streets of Delhi (and by providing an English asterisked translation of those at the bottom of the page) to using political satire, Roy has experimented with ways that language is, or, rather, could be. She is in a league

of her own. This novel undoubtedly should be made part of every syllabus on postmodernism/deconstructionism.

About the Reviewer

Pratiti Shirin is an Assistant Professor at the Department of English, University of Dhaka, Dhaka, Bangladesh. She completed a Masters in Education and International Development from the UCL Institute of Education, London, UK, in 2015 under the Commonwealth Shared Scholarship Scheme. Her publications include 'The Position of Women in Kautilya's *Arthashastra'* published by the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh in 2009. In 2016, she published her London based memoir *Under European Skies*. Her areas of interests include post-colonial literature, feminism and gender studies. She may be contacted at pratshirin85@gmail.com.