

ARUNDHATI ROY'S CONTRIBUTION TO INDIAN WRITING IN ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

The present paper "Arundhati Roy's Contribution to Indian writing in English" deals with the study of different writings of Arundhati Roy in which she takes her readers on a labyrinthine journey through her characters and takes courageous leaps seemingly confident that readers will be able to fill the gaps and follow her trail. The study shows how she projected herself by whetting writing skills with complex structure and sharp social commentary, how she artistically deals with the lives of the underdogs that sympathetically creates a certain stir in the minds of the readers.

KEYWORDS: *Harbinger, Nationalism, Unconsoled, Separatism, Shattered Heart, Transgender*

INTRODUCTION

Arundhati Roy, the harbinger cum princess among the Indian writers is also an award-winning filmmaker, and a trained architect. Arundhati Roy was born in Shillong, Meghalaya, in 1961 to Rajib Roy, a Bengali Hindu tea plantation manager from Calcutta and Mary Roy, a Keralite Malayali Syrian Christian. Mary Roy, a political activist, won an unprecedented victory for women's rights in Kerala. Thanks to her persistence, the Supreme Court granted Christian women in Kerala the right to have an inheritance. Mary Roy, homeschooled her until the age of ten, then she began attending regular classes. Arundhati Roy attended school at Corpus Christi, Kottayam, followed by the Lawrence School, Lovedale, in Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu. She then studied architecture at the School of Planning and Architecture, Delhi. Like her mother she is also an active social worker involved in human rights and environmental causes. She has been reluctant to discuss her father publicly, having spent very little time with him during her lifetime; Arundhati Roy instead focuses on her mother's influence in her life. She married Gerard Da Cunha, whom she met at college. Their marriage lasted approximately four years. She remarried with Pradin Krishen and presently lives in Delhi with her second husband and two daughters Pia and Mithva from his first husband.

After graduating, along with teaching aerobics, Arundhati Roy supported herself by whetting writing skills. She eventually wrote several film scripts, which are recognized for their complex structure and sharp social commentary. Besides writing Arundhati Roy starred in the films. Even when she was a low-profile writer, Arundhati Roy began to assert her political opinions loudly. She rallied media support for Phoolan Devi, a politician and former criminal of Robin-Hood fame, whom she felt was being misrepresented by the film *Bandit Queen* (directed by Shekhar Kapur).

Besides the film scripts Arundhati Roy is widely known for political activism (perhaps along the lines of Noam Chomsky). She has published many works of nonfiction including several essays.

Her journey from architecture to writing was bumpy one full of ups and downs, twists and turns. As she herself accepts. Each time I step out, I hear the snicker-snack of knives being sharpened but that's good. It keeps me sharp.¹ She hopped from, one job to another. She worked in the films but was not successful. The script writing did not work either. She was involved in a court case regarding the controversy raised by her criticism of Shekhar Kappor's film *Bandit Queen*. After the controversy surrounding *Bandit Queen* subsided, she put all these things behind her and retired to private life to concentrate on her writing, and this eventually evolved into *The God of Small Things* which won the prestigious Booker prize in 1997. Arundhati Roy began writing *The God of Small Things* in 1992 and finished it in 1996. Arundhati Roy spent her childhood in Ayemenem, Kerala, where the novel is set. It used to be a small village at that time.

In 2002, she won the Lannan Foundation's Cultural Freedom Award for her work concerning the civil societies. In 2003, she was awarded the Global Human Rights Awards in San Francisco and gained special recognition as a Woman of Peace. In 2004, Arundhati Roy was awarded the Sydney Peace Prize for her social campaigns and for promoting tolerance and non-violence. In 2006, she was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award, for her collection of essays on contemporary issues *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*. However, she declined it in protest against the Indian Government for pursuing brutal and callous policies as inhuman behaviour towards industrial workers, a growing militarization and economic neo-liberalization. In 2011, she was awarded the Norman Mailer Prize for Distinguished Writing. Arundhati Roy was featured in the 2014 list of Time 100, the 100 most influential people in the world.

The nomenclature of their contribution to Indian writing is as follows:

Arundhati Roy has two fictional works in her share; *The God of Small Things* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*.

Besides Arundhati Roy's fictional works some major non-fictional works are:

The End of Imagination, *The Greater Common Good*, *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*, *The Cost of Living*, *Power Politics*, *War Talk*, *The Checkbook and the Cruise Missile* (with David Barsamian), *An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire*, *The Shape of the Beast*, *Listening to Grasshoppers*, *Broken Republic*, *Capitalism: A Ghost Story*, *Things That Can And Can't Be Said: Essays and Conversations* (with John Cusack), *The Doctor and the Saint: Caste, Race and the Annihilation of Caste*, *The Debate between B. R. Ambedkar and M. K. Gandhi*. She also has some film scripts and television serials in her share as: *Which Annie Gives It Those Ones*, *Electric Moon*, *The Banyan Tree* and *DAM / AGE: A FILM*.

On being a party in experience like four years in jail during the writing process of *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy says that she felt no obligation to write another novel. I didn't want to be like some factory producing novels, and I don't want to live my life as a project – in some ways I want to do as little as possibl. There's so much noise in the world, so why add to it? In my case, I only write when I can't not. (Jack "Arundhati Roy: India's bold and brilliant daughter").

Truly, the literary world has waited for two decades for Arundhati Roy to release a second novel since her 1997 debut, *The God of Small Things* – but the worth of waiting automatically gets proved with the publication of *The Ministry*

¹Arundhati Roy, *The Shape of the Beast*, (New Delhi Penguin Books India, 2009) 25.

of *Utmost Happiness* in 2017. Twenty years ago, *The God of Small Things* took the literary world by storm; Arundhati Roy again stirred the literary world with the publication of her second novel. She dedicated *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. "To, The Unconsoled". A small phrase but can connote a thousand possible interpretations. So who are the "unconsoled," and why is the book dedicated to them? Arundhati Roy herself asserts The Unconsoled are whoever you think they are. I would prefer to leave that open [to the reader]. Novels are sophisticated things. You can't use blunt weapons and analysis on the. A novel is a prayer, you don't do it mechanically. Nothing is not deliberate and yet nothing is deliberate. Every little stitch is stitched and when the picture emerges, sometimes even I'm surprised.² (Tay, "Arundhati Roy: a second novel, 20 years after *The God of Small Things*").

Really, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* again surprised the global readers. It retains some of Arundhati Roy's writing style from her first novel, the book is a completely different beast in the storytelling. As Arundhati Roy herself says, but in a way *The God of Small Things* was about a broken heart, and that broken heart existed inside a family, so it had a kind of coherence of that particular social unit. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is about a shattered heart. Almost nobody in it has a family, and even if they do, they live on the edge of it. There's a heart, but it's a shattered heart - a mended heart, but it's not from within a little family unit, they create that by bringing their shards. (Tay, "Arundhati Roy: a second novel, 20 years after *The God of Small Things*").

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness is loosely divided into narrative segments, and focuses on a part of Indian society that has not been covered extensively in popular fiction – the world of the "hijra" – neither male nor female, but an unofficial third gender, a transgender. Thanks to the diverse range of other characters the readers get a glimpse into not just the life of hijra, but also into other outcasts of society, marginalized due to gender, caste, skin colour, religion or poverty.

Arundhati Roy ransacks life in India in the wake of the partition through the eyes of two characters: Anjum, a transgender woman who comes into her own only to find herself redefined by tragedy, turning to a cemetery in Delhi for refuge; that becomes one of the settings in the novel – a rambling house cobbled together within a graveyard that gradually becomes something of a halfway hotel for the bereft. It is a significant detail as graveyards, like airports, are places of transition – gateways to other places and dimensions. It also brings out the overall hopeful tone of the novel. Anjum is told that a Hijra is a living creature that is incapable of happiness. The riot is inside us. The war is inside us³ (Arundhati Roy, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 27). But she at times becomes able to search happiness in the dull and dreary corners of the heart. What mattered was that [the moment] existed. To be present in history, even as nothing more than a chuckle, was a universe away from being absent from it, from being written out of it altogether" (Arundhati Roy, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 55). Here, Only the dead are free because marginalized life is the emblem of endless non-stop ordeals (Arundhati Roy, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 361) but Dying became just another way of living (Arundhati Roy, *The Ministry of Utmost*

² Karen Tay, "Arundhati Roy: a second novel, 20 years after *The God of Small Things*" *Stuff*. June 04, 2017. <https://www.stuff.co.nz/entertainment/books/93086945/Arundhati-Arundhati-Roy-a-second-novel-20-years-after-The-God-of-Small-Things>.

³ Arundhati Roy *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (London: Penguin, UK, 2017) 27.

Happiness 320). Again fresh beginning of afresh sufferings! Resultant such beliefs as Sach Khuda hai. Khuda hi Sach hai. Truth is God. God is Truth automatically provides powers to continue the jolty and jerky life of every sufferer on the Earth. (Arundhati Roy, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 25).

Tilo, a trained architect who journeys to the Kashmir region to rekindle her on- and off- again love affair with Musa a freedom fighter. There are some confused characters also that each takes a stand on the soapbox in turns, from the security guard who goes by the moniker of his hero – Saddam Hussein – to the graveyard’s tenant dung beetle, Guih Kyom. The author weaves together a dazzling narrative nearly as complex as the reality of the fight of the bloody partition by forcing her characters through themes of Hindu nationalism and Kashmiri separatism and exposing them to some other atrocities like the 1969 Gujarat riots, the most deadly incident of Hindu-Muslim violence since the 1947 divide, until the 1989 Bhagalpur riots.

It’s in the western state of Gujarat that Anjum develops a fear of living that forces her to seek refuge among the dead. She tried to un-know what they had done to all the others – how they had folded the men and unfolded the women. And how eventually they had pulled them apart limb from limb and set them on fire. But she knew very well that she knew. (Arundhati Roy, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 47).

Arundhati Roy takes her readers on a labyrinthine journey as chaotic and lively as the streets of modern-day Delhi themselves. While the tales of both Anjum and Tilo might be framed as the individual love stories of two people who exist on the fringes of society, ultimately, they serve a mighty purpose of throwing light on the grave national shortcomings by encapsulating in poetic lines “How to tell a shattered story? By slowly becoming everybody, No by slowly becoming everything.”

In her bid to “become everything”, the author takes courageous leaps, seemingly confident that readers will be able to fill the gaps and follow her trail. For that reason, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* demands a certain degree of attention and reflection in equal parts – but dedicated readers will come away rewarded with a renewed sense of empathy for humanity, despite its shortcomings.

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