

A MICROCOSM OF LIFE AND DEATH: REVIEW OF THE MINISTRY OF UTMOST HAPPINESS

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ABSTRACT

The paper tries to review the second fiction of Booker Prize winner Arundhati Roy. The outlook on this work which was long listed for Man Booker Prize 2017 opens to us a vast world of life, death, humor, violence and gender issues which makes the novelist's second coming far superior to her microcosm of Kerala in *The God of Small Things*.

KEYWORDS: The Ministry Of Utmost Happiness, Arundhati Roy, Life, Death, Transgender, Kashmir

INTRODUCTION

A Microcosm of Life and Death: Review of the Ministry of Utmost Happiness

Ten years of deep meditation and ardent writing has given birth to a wonderful work of all times, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Arundhati Roy has told a series of shattered stories revolving around different characters, many of their resemblances with the dead and alive cannot be missed out.

To quote Tile, one of the protagonists, "How to tell a shattered story? By slowly becoming everybody. No. By slowly becoming everything"(436). The narration, following the same pattern as that of *The God of Small Things* which won her the Booker, is quite engaging and tinged with humor.

In spite of looking at the bleak side of our country's history, the reader cannot but miss the pleasures of laughter that rings throughout the story. It erupts in the voice of Anjum, the transgender whose voice is given a boundless space by Roy. The laughter cannot be missed in Gulrez, who is otherwise a minor character in the story.

The Transgenders' meeting with the doctor on Anjum's deviant state of mind is also colored with funny moments. Maybe Roy was trying to make the most serious subject of her heart bearable in the eyes of a reader with repartee, jokes and wry humor.

The story begins with the locale of a graveyard, which promises us a break from the usual readings centered in happy homes and palaces.

From page one Anjum's physical and mental torture is laid bare. She left her own home at the age of 14 to join a community of Transgenders, whom she leaves later and moves into the recluse of graves.

She is compared to a tree which is true by the end of the novel. Anjum is the unflinching tree which keeps rooted firmly on ground ushering in all kinds of birds like Zainab, Sadam Hussein, Tilo, Azad Bhartiya, Miss Jebeen the Second and Nimmo.

They belong to different age groups, traditions, have varied needs and desires, but seeking refuge under Anjum either for a short time or till eternity. The story slowly shifts from Anjum to Biplab Dasgupta, who addresses himself as "absurdly named" and to Tilotamma.

Biplab was on deputation to the Ministry of Defense and Tilotamma who he knew from college days was in Kashmir to meet their old friend Musa, a much vaunted "terrorist" for the forces.

Events turn out that Tilo gets married to Naga, another college friend to get herself safe undercover from police suspicions about being an associate of the terrorist leader. But only she and Musa knows the real reason for her immediate nuptial vows.

The rooms which Tilo had rented became the home of Jabeen the Second, who was adopted unofficially by Tilo, and later by Anjum. She was rechristened as Udaya, after her birth mother's letter reaches Jannat Guest House, the sanctuary run by Anjum.

Towards the end of the novel, we look like vessels full to the brim, after perusal of story after story, about love, violence, war, brutality, honesty, conceit, politics, human relations and questions about life and death. Each tale is connected to the next by the sheer narrative skills of Roy.

Whether you can call it a novel about transgender issue or a political satire or a historical fiction is a question which is hard to answer. The canvas is so vast that almost everything has come in, bit by bit, to paint the utmost happy, yet sad picture of life.

A special applause for the poetic rendering of even quite disturbing episodes like for instance, "Martyrdom stole into the Kashmir Valley from across the Line of Control, through moonlit mountain passes manned by soldiers.

Night after night it walked on narrow, stony paths wrapped like thread around blue cliffs of ice..." (313). another round of applause for the beautiful way in which the most uncanny has been rendered: Normality in our part of the world is a bit like a boiled egg: its humdrum surface conceals at its heart a yolk of egregious violence (150). Also the ability to blend inanimate with humane is detailed in the description of an Usha fan in Khwabgah, the residence of the transgender community.

The fan is "coy, moody and unpredictable. Wasn't young anymore and often needed to be cajoled and prodded with a long-handled broom and then she would go to work, gyrating like a slow pole dancer" (20).

Arundhati Roy has also brought in an innovative method to suggest the trauma faced by children of the Valley through a notebook of Tilo where in comprehensive exercises on grammar for children are all narratives on a violence laden Kashmir.

Apart from being a bit elaborate on the describing people and places, the novel has done a very good job in trying to comprise a massive tale in 438 pages through third person and first person narrations.

The matured writer who waited for words has bloomed into a tree, which has a space for all kinds of birds of the air clinging to the branches.

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