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THE MINISTRY OF UTMOST HAPPINESS, BOOK REVIEW-
A CHRONICLE OF DEATH AND RESURRECTION

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"I had dreamed of speaking with the dead, and even now I do not abandon this dream. But the mistake was that I would hear a single voice, the voice of the other. If I wanted to hear one, I had to hear the many voices of the dead. And if I wanted to hear the voice of the other, I had to hear my own voice. The speech of the dead, like my own speech, is not private property."

(Stephen Greenblatt, Shakespearean negotiations)

Arundhati Roy's latest work of fiction, "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness" came after a twenty-year long wait since the author's debut Booker-prize winning novel, "God of Small Things." whether she was suffering from writer's block or in her words, "Fiction takes it's time," we must say that within this interval, her novel, like a sedimentary rock has gathered its layers to disperse spontaneously in all directions. Her creative muse has finally been so kind to her that her work speaks louder than her critics. She has not only given voice to the voiceless but also to the dead. Artistic creation is not separate from society. As Hegel said, 'the work belongs and does not belong to its originator'. She had dreamed to speak with the 'other,' with the dead, so she did, the different voices emerging out of the text, represent the voices of the 'other' the voices of the dead. It would be our responsibility to decode these voices through our disinterested endeavor to learn and propagate the best. When fiction visited her again, it nourished her with such vision and reality that goes beyond race religion or borders. In one of her interview Roy, states:

When people used to ask me how long it took to write The God of Small Things, I would say 37 years, because to me, a novel is not a product. Which is not to say that I have anything against things that are turned out quickly? They can be beautiful too. But for me, this novel, even more so than The God of Small Things probably, is like a sedimentary rock. It's got layers and layers and layers and layers and layers, and it took me a long time to write it. It could be that you can read it swimming on the top layer, and then you can read it in the middle, and then you could be a bottom feeder. Every time I think it's read, I think the story will change. It's like a map of a city, or it's like knowing a city or something. I was never hurried, because I needed to live with these characters for a long time to know that our relationship was truly cemented. *(Interview)*

The book has a remarkable narrative plot, with complex set of characters mostly drawn from the lower strata of the society. The terse prose style mingled with occasional aphorism and apt similes is used to dig deep into the Indian modern history to explore the socio-political themes. Roy, as a keen observer of the events -land reform that disowned poor farmers; Godhra train burning; and the insurgency in Kashmir, compels the reader to search facts in the debris of history. The book is replete with the themes of racism, gender inequality and religious fanaticism. In fact, it is a compendium of alternatives – alternative structure of kinship, resistance and romance. It is a kind of novel, where we find, a perfect marriage of art and politics, history and fiction, reason and imagination. She, through her beautiful language, creativity and wide reading, exposes the grim and violent truths that would scare anybody of the prevailing socio-political condition of the nation. The hybrid language of the book with beautiful quotations from Urdu, and references to sacred scriptures expose myth with religion. This widens the critical horizons of the novel as a new innovation in the contemporary Indian English fiction. The book can be read from various theoretical approaches –feminist/ gender theories, cultural discourse, political per se and so on.

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness takes us on an intimate journey of many years across the Indian landscape. The story moves from the cramped neighborhoods of Old Delhi and the roads of the new city to the mountains and valleys of Kashmir and beyond. The novel, told in whisper with elaborate use of similes and occasional use of allusions from religious scripture. The heroes and heroines of the novel are not like the epic heroes, but mostly an ordinary people excluded and broken by the world they live in. they undergo a series of vicissitudes and finally rescued and patched together by acts of love.

From its hyperbolic title to its cumbersome expause, The Ministry of Utmost Happiness is everything that Roy's first novel, God of Small Things (1997) is not. The book actually begins from its very cover page with the picture of a marble grave and the setting. The book's dedication- "to, the unconsolated," sets its subject matter- to sooth those whose narratives have only been 'buried under years of silence' and ignored by the 'pages of the hegemony's history', a history entrusted upon the marginal. To re-write this history through the voices of victims, she has proved herself to be an extraordinary historiographer and an intelligent story teller.

The novel consists of twelve chapters entitled "Where Do Old Birds Go to Die?", "Khwabgah", "The Nativity", "Dr. Azad Bhartiya", "The Slow-Goose Chase", "Some Questions for Later", "The Landlord", "The Tenant", "The Untimely Death of Miss Jebeen the First", "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness", "The Landlord" and "Guih Kyom".

This hulking and sprawling tale has two main stands: one follows Anjum, a hijra, unrolling threadbare Persian carpet in a city graveyard she calls home. She and her

company harbor a hope that has no entity but only to revivify the breath lost by years ago. The other follows Tilo, a thorny and irresistible architect turned activist (who seems to be modeled on Roy herself), and the three men who fall in love with her.

The first chapter, "Where Do Old Birds Go to Die?" Anjum has been compared with the tree. The tree could mean a natural growth. It could also signify her will to live against all the forces, shuttling her between the poles. She defies the vultures that loomed in the high branches of the tree. The vulture being eliminated through poison acts as a metaphor, the way Indian society is poisoned by history of corrupt and venal politicians, religious hatreds, and the overflowing rivers of blood, death and denied justice. When we move forward we find that she is called by different names- Magnu, Romeo, Anjum, a history is imposed on her, through different names, but she is least bothered about it. "It doesn't matter. I'm all of them, I'm Romi and Juli, I'm Laila and Majnu. And Mujna, why not? Who says my name is Anjum, I'm Anjuman. I'm a mehfil, I'm a gathering. Of everybody and nobody, of everything and nothing." (Roy, 4). As we discover more and more, we notice that Anjum really becomes a mehfil for all. Her Jannat Guest House acted as an abode for multifaith and multi-caste people. In second chapter, we find Anjum in Khwabgah, the resort exclusively belonging to the transgender as their safe-zone. Throughout the first four chapters, the readers are introduced to one of the subject-matters of the novel - the domain of the *hijra*- the transgender or third gender people.

The second strand of the story deals with S. Tilottama simply referred as Tilo, a nonconformist architect with a personality like smoke: quite, diffuse, bewitching. Her romance with a Kashmiri insurgent, she becomes an observer of, and even a participant in, the conflict time. Her strident unconventionality is writ all over her. Her dark complexion, laconic nature, alert presence and every breath she takes are burdened with layers of meaning. She is courted by three men, Biplop Dasgupta, Nagraj Hariharan and Musa Yeswi. It is through Tilo's narration that Roy paints a picture of dystopian Kashmir ravaged by human rights abuses. There is no ministry of utmost happiness in troubled Kashmir except the ministry of innocent executions by the corrupt and venal politicians.

Roy's rich and knowing narration wings across the landscape, traversing caste, religion and gender divides. She acerbically captures the cruel ironies of city like Delhi where dead pampers lie in "air conditioned splendour." It is a story about our contemporary world delivered through the microcosm of individuals living through the never ending and harrowing conflict in Kashmir and the marginal communities of outsiders in Delhi. The Ministry of Utmost Happiness demands a certain degree of attention and reflection in equal parts. The dedicated readers will certainly come away with a rewarded sense of empathy for humanity, despite its short comings. *The Ministry of Utmost happiness* is not a sole apprenticeship of imagination; rather, it is a joint feat of both imagination and reality. Everyone who has a sophisticated taste for

literature and is enthusiastic about Indian political and religious history should read it at least once since it offers a pleasant reading with the features of fiction as opposed to the tedious prosaic nature of textbooks on politics of India.

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