

## Book Review

Shruti Rawal

<b>Title</b>	<i>The Ministry of Utmost Happiness</i>
<b>Author</b>	Arundhati Roy
<b>Publisher</b>	Penguin Random House India
<b>Year</b>	2017
<b>No. of Pages</b>	464
<b>Price</b>	Rs. 599.00

Arundhati Roy has returned to the world of fiction after a gap of two decades and the novel is definitely worth the wait for readers and critics, alike. Roy has become a leading political and social activist of the country in the years that followed the release and success of her first novel. This novel is grand in its approach and attempt but lacks the innocent passion and understanding of the first. The plot is intricate, the stories painful and the drama intense. All these have been spun together meticulously by her. The narration of the novel can be summed by the poetic lines she uses – “How to tell a shattered story? /By slowly becoming everybody/No. By slowly becoming everything.” So the writer decides to become everything or rather everyone in this novel.

She spins a complicated tale with a gamut of characters: Anjum, Tilo, Musa, Naga, Biplab, Revathy, Sadaam, Saeeda and innumerable others whose pain is palpable throughout the novel. Of all the characters Tilo and Anjum emerge as the two great heroines of this social and political saga. The novel is a socio-political document of the last two decades, though some events defy the chronology of the novel. It feels like the writer (activist) has painstakingly beaded the pearls, which are unfortunately the blemishes on our country.

The story starts with Aftab (Anjum) who is a transgender. His mother tries hard to accept him and hide his true identity from his father. The parents later try to get him treated but the tendencies (behavior) as the doctor points out do not change. He manages to enter Khwabgarh (the house of the transgenders) which allures him and where he finally finds acceptance. The novel moves forward as she emerges as a major *hijda* of the Delhi *gharana* to her title being challenged. She has to make way for the progressive and educated Saeeda who emerges as the new face of Khwabgarh. She tries to find fulfillment in being a mother to Sophia but her experience in Gujarat (Gujarat riots of 2002) makes her a paranoid due to which the child alienates herself. Dejected from the world, she takes refuge in a graveyard amidst the dead. She is joined by Sadaam who pretends to be a Muslim, though he is a Dalit. He tells his tale which is heart touching as his father was killed by a mob who thought he had killed the cow, when he was just cleaning the remains of a dead cow.

The novel forays into the story of Tilo, Naga, Musa and Biplab which violates the chronology of the novel. The scene takes the readers to Jantar Mantar where

Anjum finds a baby who is later revealed to be the infant of Revathy (Naxalite) who is raped by policemen. The political backdrop changes to Anna Hazare's movement. The novel takes us into the life of Tilo who is deserted by her mother, only to be later adopted by her. She is a recluse, an enigma who refuses to fit in the social norms. Musa is from Kashmir and through him the writer takes us into the alleys of the bloody Kashmir. She has depicted the callousness of the soldiers but has equally criticized the militants. The cruelty of Pinky, the ACP and Amarjit pierce the heart of the reader. The depiction, though biased can be justified by the fact that it is purely a work of fiction (more so of an activist). She has shown the plight and dilemma of the Kashmiris who do not know where they truly belong. The same people are informants of the militants and the soldiers. It is their way of surviving the place. They seem to be fighting for *Azaadi* though they are aware that this will only lead to the ultimate destruction of Kashmir.

The language of Arundhati Roy in *The God of Small Things* was elliptical, silly and expressive of the characters, but in this novel it is more controlled. There are multiple narrators that make the plot incomprehensible at certain junctures. It has fragments of songs and poetry which add a different dimension to the prose.

The events of Kashmir, the killings in Gujarat, the Naxalite issue, Bhopal Gas Tragedy, the rising intolerance, conditions of Dalit, transgenders, callousness and indifference of authorities and the political scenario have been aptly covered by her. The problem is that it feels like a very grim depiction of a country which still manages to survive. But is survival enough? She raises questions throughout the novel that pinch the conscience of a sensible reader. The writer had an innocence and charm in her debut novel, which seems to have been corrupted by Roy as an activist. The broad canvas with colorful palette of characters serves as an exquisite backdrop but the activist seems to have overshadowed the writer.

I feel it is easier to discard the novel as over ambitious and pessimistic but the true attempt and pain of an activist makes this novel a notable one. It may be hailed by the West for its own political interests that likes to project our country as "troubled". The beauty lies in the simplistic pleasure of reading a tale, in this case, of Anjum, who gives up at junctures that feel like the destination, only to collect herself in the hope of seeking the greener pastures. The spirit of the book is Anjum and not Tilo, who is alive even amidst death.