

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness: Through the Eyes of an Activist for Palestine

Review of Arundhati Roy's Book

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Global Research, July 23, 2017

Region: [Asia, Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#), [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

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Of the roughly million of novels published annually worldwide, Arundhati Roy is one of the rare maverick authors for whom justice and politics is integral to her art and to her identity. Her new novel, The Ministry of Utmost Happiness, which I would describe as her summa injustica of India, has been criticised as '[A Novel That Is Neither Creative Nor Fiction.](#)'

Well, it is definitely outside the run-of-the-mill novel genre enjoyed by suburban book clubs, and you can thank the god of your choice for that! Such novels are set in a bubble world, sanitised and separate from politics, with generally predictable characters that trudge on predictably from one predictable plot to another reaching a predictable denouement. Ho hum. For me, as an activist that IS boring.

Conversely, in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* we enter a world intensely crammed, like India itself, with the vicissitudes and minutiae of the human condition ranging from rapture to agony, from goodness and evil and all in between... infused with politics with its omnipresent stench of violence.

"It was as though the Apparition whose presence we in India are all constantly and acutely aware of had suddenly surfaced, snarling, from the deep, and had behaved exactly as we expected it to. Once its appetite was sated it sank back into its subterranean lair and normality closed over it. Maddened killers retracted their fangs and returned to their daily chores – as clerks, tailors, plumbers, carpenters, shopkeepers – life went on as before. 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. It is our constant anxiety about that violence, our memory of its past labours and our dread of its future manifestations, that lays down the rules for how a people as complex and as diverse as we are continue to coexist – continue to live together, tolerate each other and, from time to time, murder one another."

Roy's novel is not a reading activity, – immersed – it becomes a tangible experience wherein one cannot but love tenderly its singular coterie of friends: Anjum the transgender Hijra, who rises, over and over from the ashes of discrimination and trauma with renewed élan vital and all embracing compassion. Then there is the entrepreneurial visionary, self-named Saddam Hussein (in honour of 'the courage and dignity of that man in the face of death') the Dalit who converted himself to Islam, and many more who are at once warmly

human, stridently individualistic, quirky and bravely resilient.

My favourite character is the archetypal elder activist, Dr Azad Bhartiya, “who had just entered, according to his own calculations, the eleventh year, third month and seventeenth day of his hunger strike” who states,

“I am fasting against the following issues: I am against the Capitalist Empire, plus against US Capitalism, Indian and American State Terrorism/ All Kinds of Nuclear Weapons and Crime, plus against the Bad Education System/ Corruption/ Violence/ Environmental Degradation and All Other Evils. Also I am against Unemployment. I am also fasting for the complete obliteration of the entire Bourgeois class. Each day I remember the poor of the world, Workers/ Peasants/ Tribals/ Dalits/ Abandoned Ladies and Gents/ including Children and Handicapped People”

Politics, is not background but a multifaceted character that appears behind many masks: the cruelty-incarnate mask of Major Amrik Singh, who has multiple Israeli doppelgängers such as General Benny Ganz, the Butcher of Gaza, and every head, past and present of [Shin Bet](#). Roy exposes the faustian media opportunists like Naga, whose transition from principled left politics to mainstream journalism embedded in right-wing propaganda and fake news is hidden behind a mask of journalistic integrity. Naga’s transition is marked by “his hero at the time was George Habash’. Roy’s choice of Habash is not subtle. Habash, unlike Arafat, never betrayed Palestinian resistance nor the integrity of historic Palestine. Naga has become the system, “Naga had started wearing tweed coats and smoking cigars. Like his father did. And talking to servants in the imperious way that his mother did.” This apeing of imperial Britain recollects colonialism at its most vile as Roy demonstrates in a [2002 article](#),

“In 1937, Winston Churchill said of the Palestinians, I quote, “I do not agree that the dog in a manger has the final right to the manger even though he may have lain there for a very long time. I do not admit that right. I do not admit for instance, that a great wrong has been done to the Red Indians of America or the black people of Australia. I do not admit that a wrong has been done to these people by the fact that a stronger race, a higher-grade race, a more worldly wise race to put it that way, has come in and taken their place.” That set the trend for the Israeli State’s attitude towards the Palestinians. In 1969, Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir said, “Palestinians do not exist.” Her successor, Prime Minister Levi Eschol said, “What are Palestinians? When I came here (to Palestine), there were 250,000 non-Jews, mainly Arabs and Bedouins. It was a desert, more than underdeveloped. Nothing.” Prime Minister Menachem Begin called Palestinians “two-legged beasts.” Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir called them “grasshoppers” who could be crushed. This is the language of Heads of State, not the words of ordinary people.”

Inevitably, there are the masks of diplomatic collaborators of Indian oppression of the Kashmir people like Garson Hobart who brings to mind the pack of Palestinian Authority/ PLO security dogs that protect Israel’s interests headed by Abba\$. Like his Zionist role models who denied Palestine’s existence, in the White House, on May 3, 2017, Abba\$ denied the existence of the freedom struggles of Kashmir, Western Sahara, West Papua, Tibet:

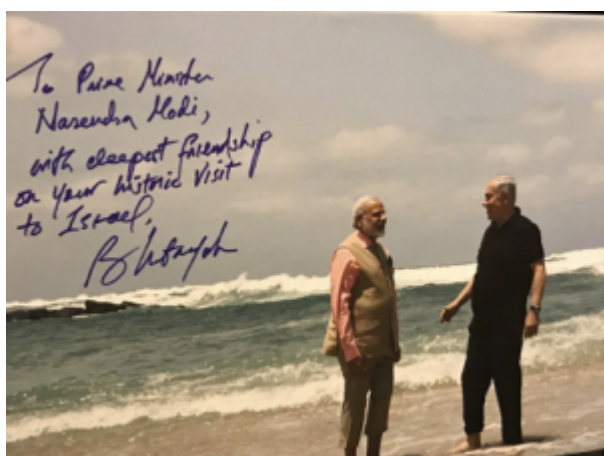
“We are the only remaining people in the world that still live under occupation.”

But Roy knows better,

“How carelessly imperial power vivisected ancient civilizations. Palestine and Kashmir are imperial Britain’s festering, blood-drenched gifts to the modern world. Both are fault lines in the raging international conflicts of today.”

And gridlocked in occupation, Kashmir and her feisty children loom large in the novel as battered but defiant heroes. From an activist perspective on Palestine, the resemblance of the Kashmir and Palestine struggles against India and Israel respectively is glaringly remarkable. The shadowy freedom fighting Musa reminded me of Hamas military chief, Mohammed Deif. And the tortured Kashmiri child’s defiance reflects the defiance and sumoud of Palestinian children and political prisoners in Israeli prisons,

“In a few minutes a burly policeman entered, carrying a thin boy in his arms. One leg of the boy’s trousers was rolled up, exposing a matchstick-thin calf held together by a splint from ankle to knee. His arm was in a plaster cast and his neck was bandaged. Though his face was drawn with pain, he didn’t grimace when the soldier deposited him on the floor. To refuse to show pain was a pact the boy had made with himself. It was a desolate act of defiance that he had conjured up in the teeth of absolute, abject defeat. And that made it majestic.”



It is unsurprising that Modi broke the longstanding Indian support for Palestine,

“It is held that Jawaharlal Nehru’s commitment to the cause of an undivided Palestine — even as Indian National Congress accepted the British decision to divide the nation on the basis of religion — forced him to reject Albert Einstein’s four-page letter as India voted against the Mandate Partition plan at the UN in 1947. It eventually recognised Israel in 1950 but without diplomatic relations.”

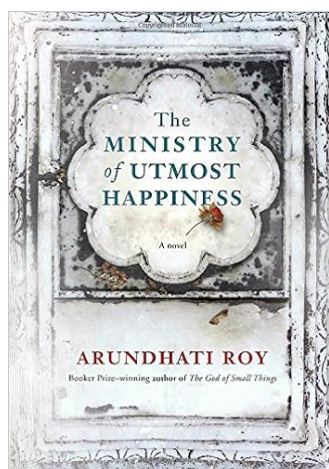
by visiting Israel and embracing Netanyahu because both are serial Muslim killers, Modi set “Thirty thousand saffron parakeets with steel talons and bloodied beaks” to massacre Muslims in the 20002 Gujarat riots. Both promote a hard-line fascist forms of nationalism,- Modi’s ‘saffron tide’ of Hindutva and Netanyahu’s Jewish state; both stand on the power of nuclear armaments and together they cinched a \$2.6 billion arms deal. The effusing delight of the Zionist media with the new-found bromance culminated in the image of Modi and Netanyahu frolicking barefoot in the sewage-infested Mediterranean caused by

Netanyahu's ordered destruction of Gaza sewage plant and electricity cuts. Karma.

Roy has been criticised for "being frustratingly rambling, The Ministry is shockingly uneven in its register" and that her "polemical instinct is far more developed than her art," however Roy is artfully crafting the uneven register and polemics to mess with our heads; to shock us alert to imperilled humanity threatened by wackos such as Modi, Netanyahu, Trump May, Merkel, Macron, the Saudis.... the list is long.

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness is a tough yet stunning literary experience. Its phenomenal breadth and depth of intelligence and unpredictable creativity far outstrips, in my view, *The God of Small Things*. It is wondrously creative. It is an experience that must be mindfully savoured as you wonder word by word where Roy's brilliance is taking you... what is around the roller coasting corner of the next word.. poetry that will make you gasp, quirkiness that charms, flagellating condemnation, a chuckle of humour, awesome acuity, shuddering contempt, fierce tenderness, brittle satire, outlandish juxtapositions where Cadbury's Fruit and Nut sit square with Torture, and where Mango Frooti can spark a Massacre.

This is not a novel for ostriches desiring soma comfort, it is for adults demanding their destiny of human dignity and Roy guides us to that end... to The Ministry of Utmost Happiness located in the Jannat Guest House where its residents live the creative actions within people's power that [Binu Matthew says](#) will "bring peace, justice and communal harmony."



Title: The Ministry of Utmost Happiness

Author: Arundhati Roy

Publisher: Knopf; 1st Edition edition (June 6, 2017)

ISBN-10: 1524733156

ISBN-13: 978-1524733155

[Click here to order.](#)

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