



New Historicism in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017)

Arundhati Roy takes up social issues in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. She wants to expose the plight of the transgender, environmental degradation, Hindu nationalism, Hindu-Muslim conflict, Anti-Sikh riots of 1984, Bhopal toxic gas disaster of 1984 and Gujarat riots of 2002. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is a vivid expose of modern India's growing pains. The novel brilliantly captures the liveliness of the Indian city and covers the past 20 years of Indian history as seen through multiple issues.

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) is set in Delhi and Kashmir but a major part takes place in Delhi. The story is told by third-person narrative in Anjum story as well as Tilotamma. The prologue begins with Anjum, a transgender, mother and riot survivor who lives in the graveyard behind the Government hospital. That day morning, Anjum felt that there is some sort of unhappiness in the air. She saw that the crows did not come but bats came. She noticed branch of vultures which sits in the higher branches.

Anjum recalls her hurtful past memory. The story of Anjum begins from her birth. She was the fourth child of Jahanara Begum and Mulaquat Ali. She lived in Shahjahanabad, Delhi. The midwife Ahlam Baji wrongly announced Jahanara was blessed with a boy child. Before her delivery, Jahanara and Mulaquat decided that if their baby was a boy they would name him Aftab. They had been waiting for six years. Though Jahanara felt happy for the birth of Aftab alias Anjum, later she discovered, "nestling underneath his boy-parts, a small, unformed, but undoubtedly girl-part." (MUH 7).

Meanwhile, Aftab started to learn singing because he had a sweet voice. So his parent decided to send him to the best singer Ustad Hameed Khan. As his fellow-student teased him, he decided to quit singing class. His father was also antagonistic towards him. He was totally inspired by the transgender called 'Bombay Silks.' Aftab escaped from his paternal house to the Khwabgah, when the outside world seemed intolerable. He could not tolerate the biological changes that were taking place in his body, "His body had suddenly begun to wage

war on him” (*MUH* 23-24). His life transformed as he entered the doorstep of Khwabgah and changed his name from Aftab to Anjum. Likewise, A. Revathi, transgender reached Delhi and changed his name Doraiswamy into A. Revathi.

Hijras are perpetual victims of social and cultural prohibition in the society. They are often discriminated and humiliated, particularly in the Southern region of the country. This is one of the reasons behind their migration to the Northern cities like Mumbai, Delhi, Pune and Kolkata. Arundhati Roy’s Anjum hails from Shahjahanabad in Delhi moves to central junction, Khwabgah, Delhi. She finds out her own community. This event is similar to Living Simile Vidya’s *I Am Vidya* (2013), undertakes a journey from Chennai to Pune to become a member of the Hijra community. Likewise, A. Revathi’s *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* (2010), deals with the life of transgender, A. Revathi decides to run away from her hometown in Salem to Delhi where she meets a group of people belonging to Hijras community. So she decides to live with them. Hijras move to urban centre because they join their community and live with them. Therefore, they are hostile in their hometown. So they migrate to the city and forming a community.

Anjum reached Dargah there and adopted an abandoned child, Zainab and transformed herself into a mother. The character of Anjum is similar to Mona Ahmed, a transgender and her adopted daughter Ayesha in real life. Siddharth Sivakumar in his online articles, “*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness: Is Arundhati Roy’s Anjum, Dayanita Singh’s Mona Ahmed?*,” *HUFFPOST* says: “If indeed the excerpt is a true representation of the entire book, the success of her novel will ultimately rest on Arundhati Roy’s ability to turn Mona Ahmed’s life into Anjum’s story.” Dayanita Singh is a close friend of Mona Ahmed. So she wrote a novel, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (2001). This novel inspired by Urvashi Butalia’s *Mona’s Story* (2002) deals with the life of Mona. This event is similar to real life character Kalki Subramaniam, a transgender who helped transgender children for their education. She produced the Tamil movie, Vijayapadma’s *Narthagi* (2011), which focused on the lives of transgender people. She is the first transgender woman in India to do a lead role in the movie. The movie creates huge awareness among the people about transgender.

Zainab suffered from severe fever. Anjum gave medicine but there was no use. So she decided to go with Zakir Mian, an old friend of Mulatqat Ali. They go to Ajmer Sharif Dargah, Ahmedabad. On the way they were caught in the Gujarat riots of 2002. Zakhir Mian was brutally attacked and killed by Hindu mob. Anjum was treated rudely and brutally in the camp. But they did not kill her because she was a Hijra. The attacker

thinks that killing Hijras was a sin. Anjum was brought back to Khwabgah by Zakir Mian's son, when he reached Gujarat in search of his father the third time. By that time, Anjum had been forced to dress up like a man. After this traumatic experience Anjum becomes frozen and withdrawn. The Gujarat riot 2002 exposes how transgenders are exploited physically as well as mentally. Anjum was exposed to the corrupt and communal atmosphere around her.

In the Khwabgah, the Hijras watched on television planes crashing into the Twin Towers in the 9\11 attack and America begins its wave of anti-Muslim movement. According to the incident, Anjum read newspaper and Television reports about the bomb blasts and terrorist attacks in America. The Poet-Prime minister warned that what had happened in America could easily happen in India. Thus, the government passed a new anti-terrorism law. During that time a group of young Muslim boys were arrested and kept in jail. Anjum shows gratitude to God that Zainab was a girl. She says, "It was so much safer" (MUH 42). As a transgender woman Anjum expresses her motherhood by this event. Roy also reveals that government fails to protect innocent Muslim boys.

Anjum wanted to teach Zainab the *Gayathri Mantra* that she was forced to learn in a camp in Gujarat. She also wanted Zainab to wear a Pathan suit and embroidered jacket. She says, "'It's safer like this', 'Gujarat could come to Delhi any day. We'll call him Mahdi'" (MUH 48). The psychological scars of Gujarat riots 2002 transform Anjum to be a protective mother as well as a caring father. She came back as a man in Pathan suit. She assumed that the political scenario that wished to annihilate the Muslim community would not spare Zainab. She had undoubtedly been a witness to crimes perpetrated to her Muslim brethren in Gujarat.

Anjum resolved to quit Hijra community as she faced hurdles. So she decided to set up her home in a graveyard. She called it Jannet Guest House, earthly paradise. Anjum has been compared with the old tree in the graveyard. She took protection in Graveyard after rejection and humiliation from the Hijra's community. The Graveyard also proved perfect place for Anjum's happiness. Because of graveyard was a sanctuary for her. Therefore, Roy highlights the nature and culture dichotomy through the exploitation and humiliation of Anjum. She never minds the humiliation and sheds all her humiliations as a tree sheds its leaves. Jannat means equal amount of safety and affection for human beings.

Arundhati Roy is known for her presentation of the unconventional. She chooses the unspoken, ill-

treated, criticised and underestimated Hijra. She throws light on the unexplored life of the transgender, in the character of Anjum. She exposes the pathetic condition and tragic life which the transgender face. But Roy gives a positive picture of Anjum by making her a heroic character who instils courage and confidence to all those people who assemble in Jannet Guest House. In the postmillennial era, Roy makes sure that transgenders have their own identity and space.

The character of Anjum runs parallel to that of Shikhandi, a transgender in the great epic *The Mahabharata*. She decides to kill Bhishma Pitamah in the Kurukshetra Battlefield. Other warriors could not accept Shikhandi as a man. So they tease Shikhandi but Shikhandi does not bother about their words. She stands in front of Bhishma and kills him. She proves her identity and complete self-awareness. But Roy's portrayal of Anjum creates her own identity to the society. So Anjum has emerged as an icon of the Third Gender in the postmillennial era.

Anjum and Zainab seek refuge in a graveyard. Anjum meets Saddam Hussein, a young boy who initially served at a mortuary. Saddam shared his thoughts with Anjum about his disgusting job experiences. He worked in the mortuary where he saw doctors, especially Hindu doctors' discrimination between upper and lower caste. He expresses: "The Hindu doctors who were required to conduct post-mortems thought of themselves as upper caste and would not touch dead bodies for fear of being polluted". (MUH 72-73)

He also exposes some of the hospital officials' theft of organs in the name of post-mortems. Anwar Bhai runs a brothel nearby on MG Road. Rubina was one among the girls in the brothel who suddenly died of burst appendix, "They were all distressed and agitated, not just by Rubina's passing, but also because the hospital returned her body with the eyes missing. The hospital said that rats had got to them in the mortuary" (MUH 78). Roy sarcastically exposes hospitals in the modern city. These are the unpleasant circumstances which lead Saddam Hussein to abandon that job. He began to work at various other places. He worked as a security guard service called Safe n' Sound Guard Service (SSGS) which exploits Saddam. So he did not give any appropriate reason to quit the job. Finally, he took shelter in the Jannat Guest House and accompanied Anjum and launched the Jannat Funeral Services.

Saddam Hussein narrates to Anjum about his tragic story of how his father and friends were beaten to death on false charges to which he is a mute victim. Because of the following incident, he changed his real

name Dayachand into Saddam Hussein. He hailed from a family of Chamars, low caste. One day his father got a message by cell phone from his nearby village to collect the carcass of a cow. On the way after collecting the carcass they were stopped by the police who demanded bribe from them. As they were not ready to give it immediately Sehrawat, a police, spread a wrong message to Anti-cow slaughter group without investigating the truth. They violently killed his father and his friend. Cow-slaughter has become common in India but in the postmillennial era, people are killing the cow killers. So in the culture of India, cow is a sacred animal and symbol of wealth in India. After Dayachand's father's lynching by the cow-vigilantes, Dayachand escaped from the place and changed his name as Saddam Hussein. Saddam decided to take revenge on Sehrawat, a police. Roy depicts authoritative officers' brutality and how they treat lower caste and poor persons in the Hindu Nationalism.

The other part of the novel takes up the life of Tilotamma alias Tilo, a rebellious student of architecture studying in Delhi. Tilo was adopted by her own mother who had initially abandoned her because she was born out of wedlock. Her mother remained unmarried for the rest of her life and opened a school. Tilo's biography is similar to Arundhati Roy's. Tilo enacted a play called *Norman, Is That You* with her friends, Musa, Biplap Dasgupta and Naga. They complete rehearsal but they did not perform because it was the time when Mrs. G—Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards. After the incidents, the assassination mob killed thousands of Sikhs in Delhi. They fired on the buses, homes, shops taxi stands with Sikhs driver. He says, "Plumes of black smoke climbing into the sky from the fires all over the city. . . I hurried home and waited for the shock of what I had witnessed to hit me" (MUH 150). Roy reveals how the city is shaken by this event. This issues resemblances the plot of Aravind Adiga's "Between the Assassinations." Similarly, British Pakistani writer, Tariq Ali's *The Assassination: Who killed Indira Gandhi* (2008) is based on Indira Gandhi assassination in Delhi.

After this incident, they started the rehearsal of the play. During this time the dreadful event happened in Bhopal which had its effect in Delhi also. So they postponed the enacting of the play. He says, "The Union Carbide pesticide plant in Bhopal sprang a deadly gas leak that killed thousands of people. The newspapers were full of accounts of people trying to flee the poisonous cloud that pursued them, their eyes and lungs on fire." (MUH 151). Roy reveals how cities are polluted, crime happened especially in Delhi. This issue resembles the plot of Indira Sinha's *Animal People* (2007) which deals with the Bhopal gas tragedy. After Tilo and Musa finish studies they move on to their native places respectively. Musa reached Kashmir where he met Arifa and

fell in love with her. Later, he joined in Kashmiri militant fighting for freedom. His wife Arifa and his daughter, Miss. Jabeen the First, were shot by the soldiers during the time of violence of 1990s Kashmir.

Ironically Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is not Ministry of Utmost Happiness but it is a Ministry of utmost despair as they continue to suffer. But in spite of their suffering and trials, they continue to be 'happy' in their present atmosphere. Roy's brilliantly interwoven the past incidents to the fiction. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* converting their 'utmost unhappiness' into happiness of marginalised people. They make *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, a symbol of HOPE and the dawn of a new era of HAPPINESS.

Works Cited

Adiga, Aravind. "Between the Assassinations." Free Press, 2010.

Ali, Tariq. *The Assassination: Who killed Indira Gandhi*. Seagull Books, 2008.

"Bhopal, Worst Industrial Accident in History," *Wired*, 3 December, 1984,
<https://www.wired.com/2010/12/1203bhopal-disaster/>

Brannigan, John. "New Historicism and Cultural Materialism," Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, Print.

Calibone, William. "Indira Gandhi cremated in Hindu Rituals." *The Washington Post*, 4 November, 1984,
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1984/11/04/indira-gandhi-cremated-in-hindu-ritual/124ca3f5-3121-4289-9c7d>

