

Talented Bankers Literary Panel Book Introduction 69

By Arya Gayathri
City Exchange Co LLC, Dubai
On deputation from SBI

THE MINISTRY OF UTMOST HAPPINESS Arundhati Roy

Arundhati Roy- the Indian author and political activist best known for her debut novel 'The God of Small Things' that bagged the Man Booker Prize for Fiction in 1997 – followed a career of journalism and non-fiction writing for nearly 20 years before her second novel, 'The Ministry of Utmost Happiness'. Well, the book which is influenced by her experiences over the years actually convinces its reader that it was worth the wait.

The novel is an unstructured blend of rich prose and vibrant poetry that glues the readers and confuses them many a time with its multiple plots and numerous characters. The author's vivid descriptions and mix of humour and horror weaves through the endless issues of caste, religious and gender inequalities; and the broader spectrum of political and economic issues in the country, and wavering emotions of grief, loss, love, hope and happiness - through the stories of a few eccentric and queer marginalised outcasts for whom there is no place in the society. This justifies the dedication of the novel to 'The Unconsoled'.

The story begins and ends in a graveyard in the busy city of Delhi. The start of the novel is with Anjum, a 'hijra', who lives "like a tree", unspeaking, all-seeing and as a 'mehfil', a gathering "of everybody and nobody, of everything and nothing." The Jannat guesthouse (the structure she made in the graveyard) at last turns out to be an asylum to the misfits who are mute to the turbulence of the society around.

The plot shifts to Anjum's birth. In Delhi an excited mother examines her new-born boy Aftab, and finds disturbing anatomical female parts in him. Though she struggled to suppress this fact and bring him up as a 'normal' boy, he was attracted to the multigenerational joint family of Hijras near his home. He shifts to live with them to be himself – or herself, and got to be popular among them as 'Anjum'. She raises a child named Zainab as her own. On a visit to a Gujarati shrine she is caught up in a

massacre of Hindu pilgrims and the mayhem that follows the Government's subsequent reprisals against the Muslims. She gets so terrified that the incidents changed her very self. She turns mum, shuns her bright-coloured clothes for a masculine Pathan suit. She later moved out of the Hijra family into her family graveyard.

Anjum's story ends abruptly with the start of Tilo's. S. Tilottama is a student at the Architecture school and is friends with Nagaraj Hariharan, Musa Yewsi and Biplab Dasgupta. Musa is Tilo's boyfriend, who later returns to his homeland Kashmir, becoming a militant fighting for freedom, marries Arifa. Their daughter is Ms. Jabeen the first.

The plot shifts from Delhi to Kashmir where India and Pakistan fight around the Line of Control, and where inhabitants belong to one among the following categories: fugitives, martyrs, informants or victims. Kashmir-the magical place that enthrals its many visitors with its natural beauty; also envelops its victims with the thick darkness of doom and despair.

Biplab Dasgupta gets to work for the country's Intelligence Bureau. Tile marries Naga, who is an influential journalist, on the advise of Musa, and abandons him later. She supports Musa from the beginning to the end as he is her soul.

The plot again shifts to Delhi. Baby Udaya is left at Jantar Mantar by Comrade Revathy, a Maoist from East Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh, who was raped and tortured by the police. As Anjum takes charge of the mayhem on seeing an abandoned baby, Tilo manages to snatch Udaya and take charge of her. Udaya comes to be known as Ms. Jabeen the second.

The shifting multiple plots and long list of characters are enough to confuse anyone but Arundhati Roy's distinct story-telling skills rivet the readers to the emotions that flow throughout the book. Jantar Mantar, Delhi is where the link to the entire plot lies. It is where various protests go on endlessly, unseen by all, like the victims of the Bhopal gas tragedy and the Association of the Mothers of the Disappeared from Kashmir- to whom no TV Camera pointed – “not even by mistake”.

Ultimately, all the outcasts take refuge at the Jannet Guest House, the structure created at the family graveyard of Anjum. They all constitute a community supporting one another, binding the gap between the living and the dead. They create a paradise

for themselves adorned by the endurance and experience of its queer inhabitants, a symbol of hope, peace and compassion amidst the conflicts, inequalities, corruption, cruel ironies and politics that spread across the vast nation, far from the glossy tourist brochures advertising a tranquil holiday at the Taj Mahal.

The entire story seems like Anjum's "patched together body and her partially realised dreams. " Roy's detailing is raw and vivid, and terrifying at times; like when she describes the story of three Maoist girls raped by the army: "They raped them on the grass... But after it was over there was no grass left."

Definitely worth the wait !

Publishers - Hamish Hamilton (UK)

Alfred A. Knopf (US)

Price - Rs.240/-