

Arundhati Roy, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (Hamish Hamilton, 2017)

A striking thing about Arundhati Roy's writing is her phonological sensitivity. From *The God of Small Things*: 'He's a filmactor,' she (Baby Kochamma) explains to Margaret Kochamma and Sophie Mol, making Adoor Basi sound like a Mactor who did occasionally Fil.¹ In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Deputy Commandant Ashfaq Mir offers to show a militant to a well-known journalist: 'Would you like to see a milton?' (p. 227). Apart from such attention to detail, which is common to both her novels, it is hard not to notice her evolution as a writer – from someone who handled a story set in small Kerala to someone who has dealt with a large canvas depicting issues as wide-ranging as Kashmir, transgender rights, Dalit (lower caste) issues, left-wing movements in east central India and colour politics in the nation. She is consistent in her commitment to 'small things': if it was mainly children afflicted by quietness and emptiness in the first, here it is a motley group of displaced and marginalised people who set up residence among tombstones. It is a changing India, where the violence of caste is superseded by the violence of dispossession brought about by land acquisitions by powerful corporate groups in the villages surrounding the big city. Roy's sociological eye remains sharply delightful as she captures the larger Indian reality of the subtleties of caste system (a Baidya is a Brahmin, but not quite), describes the Hijra (transgender) community in Delhi and passingly mentions the global impact of Malayalee nurses.

The author is slightly experimental with the narrative perspective and chronology, which should not be a challenge to the experienced reader. The novel starts with the attempts at self-discovery of a Delhi Hijra and her circle slowly expands by including other interesting characters including a charming young Dalit man, curiously named Saddam Hussein. It develops to a point where more characters are introduced in a major anti-corruption event that turns out to be a pivotal point in the novel.

Part of the story gets to be told from the perspective of a bureaucrat who reeks of elitism, obedience to traditional and modern hierarchical structures and banality (in the sense of Arendt's *Banality of Evil*). The rest of the story revolves around three of his friends from his college days – Tilo, the unconventional, half-Dalit, wandering woman; Naga, a radical university student who transforms to an extremely successful journalist writing about the Kashmir situation; and Musa, a quiet and sensitive man forced by circumstances to respond intensely to the insane situation in Kashmir. Tilo's deep friendship with Musa takes her into the depths of the political crisis of Kashmir. Her description of the problem in Kashmir is sharp: 'Martyrdom stole into the Kashmir Valley from across the Line of Control, through moonlit mountain passes manned by soldiers'.

¹ 'Kochamma' in Malayalam means 'aunty'. 'Mactor' occurs on page X of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, New York: Random House, 1997) 137.

The story ends with the picture of a rapidly urbanising India, which pushes the motley group of dispossessed individuals to their happy shelter in a graveyard.

What befalls the soldier Murugesan is indicative of the multiple layers of violence in the country. Murugesan, the dark Dalit from Tamil Nadu, is teased for his complexion by his colleagues and the locals of Kashmir. However, he represents the army that often resorts to violence to maintain peace in the valley. But back home in Tamil Nadu, he is a Dalit who cannot expect a dignified treatment in his village. By juxtaposing different instances of violence, the reader is often made to see the tensions underlying the functioning of a complex democracy. The range of issues woven into the novel's plot is as broad as the issues Roy has been engaged with in the last two decades. The clever device she has adopted to tie these issues together is the wandering Tilo. Resilient and clear-sighted, she is detached enough to understand issues in different parts of the country and empathic enough to make personal connections with the victims of various kinds of violence.

Arundhati Roy's journalistic side can be an occasional turn-off for the avid fiction-reader. Roy's simultaneous self-cultivation (or *bildung*) as an informed activist as well as a writer clearly comes through in the way reportage is interwoven into the fictional narrative. Perhaps in modern India, very few can afford to practise the craft of fiction-writing while remaining indifferent to what is happening around them. There are two interesting correlations here with respect to orientations of two groups of Indian writers who write in English. First, there are those who present the rising urban middle class's brighter picture of the country. Then there are the ones like Roy who refuse to ignore the Adivasis (the indigenous inhabitants who traditionally lived in forest land) who are displaced by industrialisation and the urban slum-dwellers who are displaced by the growth of the organised city. Although we get glimpses of a deeply context-sensitive writer's attempts to 'seek joy in the saddest places' and 'never, never to forget' (to use her own phrases from the non-fiction work *The Cost of Living*),² this novel is likely to be remembered more for its celebration of the country's diversity than as an exceptional work of art. Good readers will have read much better novels.

Jobin M. Kanjirakkat

² Arundhati Roy, *The Cost of Living* (New York: The Modern Library, 1999) 105.