

# Interrogating the Plurality of ‘Azadi’ *vis-à-vis* the Monolithic ‘Independence’ of Nation-State: A (Political) Reading of Arundhati Roy’s *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

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## Abstract

Arundhati Roy’s second novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) addresses many of the issues and concerns we tend to associate with her writings—the violence of nation-states, majoritarian intolerance over the minorities, the denial and violation of human rights and the struggle to restore those basic rights as well as the quest for identities, both personal and national. In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Roy uses all these themes through a plurality of discourses which in turn interrogate the nature of different versions of azadi/freedom. These versions include the quest for identity of a transgender born in a Muslim family, the freedom of a woman to choose between lovers and ideals as well as the complex dynamics of insurgency in Kashmir where the word ‘azadi’ is used both as a slogan and a goal. In a work clearly meant to subvert the government’s promotion of “one nation, one religion, one language” agendum, Roy valorises the plurality of cultures, religions and languages and demands the real freedom which involves “azadi from poverty, from hunger, from caste, from patriarchy, and from repression”. The present paper tries to interrogate the ways in which the author celebrates the plurality of discourses *vis-à-vis* the nation-state’s promotion of a single, accepted version of Independence. At the same time, the paper also tries to probe if the author’s political perspective interferes with the exhilaration of possibilities offered by the genre of fiction and limits the scope of the work merely to a tool of political instrument. The paper gives a further political dip and interrogates if Roy’s attempts to subvert the monolithic version of “truth” becomes trapped in the quagmire of her own version of truth which can also be viewed as biased and therefore may be challenged and contested.

**Keywords:** azadi, Independence, plurality, transgender, insurgency, Kashmir

In the Introduction to her latest collection of essays *Azadi: Freedom. Fascism. Fiction* (2020), Arundhati Roy introduces a renewed valence to the Persian word ‘azadi’ as she goes on to associate the word with fiction. Foregrounding the freedom offered by the protean genre of novel/fiction, Roy elaborates that “a novel gives a writer the freedom to be as complicated as she wants — to move through worlds, languages, and time, through societies, communities, and politics. A novel can be endlessly complicated, layered, but that is not the same as being loose, baggy, or random. A novel, to me, is freedom with responsibility. Real, unfettered Azadi — freedom” (*Azadi* 1). It is an interesting observation coming from a writer who in her literary career of almost three decades, has published only two novels, with a gap of exactly twenty years between the two. In between, she has continued to produce volumes of non-fiction works giving free rein to her activist self, earning both commendation and notoriety. Yet, Roy incorporates the word ‘fiction’ in the subtitle of *Azadi* and expresses her visible delight in the exhilaration of possibilities offered by the genre of fiction that “joins the world and becomes the world” (*Azadi* 1). It may well be pointed out that the lectures/essays of *Azadi* were delivered/written between 2018 to 2020, on the wake of the publication of her second novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017). There are bound to be, and indeed there are, certain commonalities between her recently published fiction and the nine non-fiction lectures/essays collected under a single volume. In fact, Roy’s introductory commentary on the freedom offered by novels, nudges our curious selves to investigate how far she has really made use of the freedom with responsibility in her latest novel.

Since its publication, the much-anticipated *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* has elicited diverse responses from the readers and critics worldwide. Comparisons to her brilliant, controversial and prize-winning debut novel *The God of Small Things* were expectedly made and there seems to be a majoritarian consensus that the second novel lacks the aesthetic brilliance as well as the intense thematic unity of the first. As Lisa Lau and Ana Christina Mendes observes that many of the “readers are discomfited by the sheer teeming sprawl of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (in plot, cast, temporal, and geographical terms)” (“Romancing the Other” 103). The novel apparently lacks focus as it conflates too many issues, assembles a wide assortment of characters, the narrative style oscillates frequently between realism and romance—all these are expected to elicit confused reader-responses. As if anticipating such responses, Roy in an interview with Amy Goodman and Nermeen Sheikh defends her approach by declaring that “there is a danger of fiction becoming domesticated ... too much of a product that has to be quickly described, catalogued, put on a particular shelf, and everybody has to know what is the theme. And, to me, I wanted to blow that open” (n.p). She indeed does so while attempting to debunk the usual categorizations, constrictions, hierarchizations entailed in the conventional generic idea of fiction. It can be expected that Roy wouldn’t have approved the attempts of critics to categorize her novel but yet critics have continued to do so. Among all such attempts, Lau and Mendes’s categorization of the novel as a ‘political romance’ (“Romancing the Other” 104) may be accepted as an appropriate description to this complex novel. The novel engages with a plurality of romantic concerns, the attaining of ‘azadi’ and ‘utmost happiness’ being the foremost among those.

In the essay “The Graveyard Talks Back: Fiction in the Time of Fake News” included in the collection *Azadi*, Roy probes deep into the nature of the word ‘azadi’. She unequivocally declares that what Indians really need is azadi “from poverty, from hunger, from caste, from patriarchy, and from repression” (158). This lecture/essay, one of Roy’s more detailed commentaries on her second novel, highlights not only the ways in which the novel brings together the two graveyards (literal and metaphorical) but also places ‘azadi’ with its plurality of connotations in direct opposition to the monolithic discourse on ‘Independence’. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, published in the seventy-first year of India’s independence from British rule, may well be considered as a work where the officially sanctioned historiography on Independence is deliberately debunked. Following the usual trajectories of historicizing a postcolonial Indian novel, there are obvious attempts to criticize the inequities, discriminations and repression that beset the largest democracy of the world. Commenting on the changing nature of nationalist discourse in post-independence India where the necessity for an anti-colonial resistance has become redundant, Perry Anderson once pointed how the direction of protest has turned from being centrifugal to centripetal. As he states, “the Indian Ideology, a nationalist discourse in a time when there is no longer a national liberation struggle against an external power, and oppression where it exists has become internal, obscures or avoids such issues” (3). There is a demand for azadi not from a foreign rule but rather azadi within the country.<sup>1</sup>

As a critique of post-Independence Indian nation-state and Indian nationalism, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* cannot claim to any kind of thematic as well as strategic originality. If we simply restrict our domain to Indian literature written in English, there are significant works like Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981), Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* (1988), Shashi Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), Rohinton Mistry’s *Such a Long Journey* (1991) and *The Fine Balance* (1995), Manju Kapur’s *A Married Woman* (2003), Neel Mukherjee’s *The Lives of Others* (2014) and so on which are deeply critical, in varying degrees, of the dynamics of post-Independence Indian politics and have also exposed the extreme authoritarian approaches of the democratically elected government. Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1997) itself came under scrutiny for its scathing attack against the activities of the communist party in Kerala. However, unlike most of the other works mentioned here, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* has a certain immediacy of intention as it is published in the third year of a government which the work is deeply critical of. The novel is an undisguised critique of the alarming rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) under the leadership of the incumbent prime minister and the increased intensity in the divisive activities of the party’s fundamentalist unit Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangha (RSS). To her chagrin, the writer (who has never been an expatriate like Rushdie or Mistry) not only had to see the obscene celebration of the foisted supremacy of majoritarian religious culture but also had to witness the travesty offered by a divisive government proclaiming the grandness of country’s independence while ensuring to deny her citizens of their basic rights to freedom. A nativistic rhetoric of Indian nationalism is espoused which is extremely parochial, divisive and unacceptable at times when in the ever-shrinking world national boundaries are becoming redundant, meaningless, porous. In his *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said seems most critical of the restrictive quality of nationalism and advances his belief that nationalism/nativism “is *not* the only

alternative. There is the possibility of a more generous and pluralistic vision of the world” (277). Said advocates that the negative view of nationalism can only be counterbalanced by ‘postnationalism’ which leads to a positive, interactive and dialogic transaction between different nation-states in a world questioning the arbitrariness of national boundaries. Roy also upholds a pluralistic vision but unlike Said she is more interested in the intra-national dynamics of nationalism. Her pluralistic vision of the nation includes the diverse connotations of freedom and the way those were continually denied to the citizens of India by all the elected governments, but especially the current one.

*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* willfully deconstructs the metanarrative of India’s grandness to expose the core of a nation suffering from poverty, casteism, gender discrimination, corruption, religious intolerance and political repression. In more than one ways, this novel looks back to Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, which one must remember was also the second novel of the author. If in Rushdie, the inseparable comingling of historical and fictional leads to a subversive formation of alternate histories, Roy also introduces several micro-stories, develops and connects those stories, offering those as an alternative to the “known” histories of the nation-state. Following the much-deployed postcolonial strategy of re-imagining the nation, both Rushdie and Roy re-imagine their contemporary histories. Redescribing and reimagining are essentially political acts. When Rushdie states that “description is itself a political act ... that redescribing the world is the necessary first step towards changing it” (13-14), he is not only offering his individual strategy as a postcolonial writer but also disclosing the secrets of all such writers who are contesting and resisting the monolithic version of truth offered by the official organs of power by redescribing the world around them. When Roy excavates the diverse connotations of ‘azadi’ buried beneath the official historiography, she is following the same strategy. There is also an innate optimism that connect both the novels. Despite the tragedy of Saleem and his fellow midnight’s children, Rushdie refuses to call his novel’s ending as pessimistic:

...the story is told in a manner designed to echo ... the Indian talent for non-stop self-regeneration. This is why the narrative constantly throws up new stories ....  
The form – multitudinous, hinting at the infinite possibilities of the country – is the optimistic counterweight to Saleem’s personal tragedy. (Rushdie 16)

A more pronounced optimism characterizes the ending of Roy’s novel. Poetry gets mixed with politics, reality finds temporary solace in dreams, graveyard turns into paradise and paradise turns into graveyards. In its attempt to expose the precarious existence of the country’s Others, the novel becomes, as Anita Felicelli observes, “an anthem for the misfits and the weirdos watching on the sidelines or being crushed by oppressive forces” (qtd. in Mendes and Lau 75). These misfits and weirdos include transgenders, religious minorities, dalits, insurgents, lonely urban women, abandoned (girl) children, eccentric activists and even non-humans. All of these characters come together to build a community, a ministry of utmost, even if temporary, happiness—happiness distilled out of the act of redescribing the world around.

The first half of the novel deliberates on the necessity of being free from patriarchy-imposed gender constrictions by presenting the trajectory of experiences of a transgender, Anjum. A congenital hermaphrodite, Anjum's sexual identity was kept hidden by her mother and she was passed as a boy, Aftab, in her early childhood. The hybrid sexual identity of the new-born child befuddled the mother completely; it was beyond her experiences of life and language:

There, in the abyss, spinning through the darkness, everything she had been sure of until then, every single thing, from the smallest to the biggest, ceased to make sense to her. In Urdu, the only language she knew, all things, not just living things but all things – carpets, clothes, books, pens, musical instruments – had a gender. Everything was either masculine or feminine, man or woman. Everything except her baby. Yes of course she knew there was a word for those like him – *Hijra*. Two words actually, *Hijra* and *Kinnar*. But two words do not make a language.

Was it possible to live outside language? (8)

This feeling of absolute helplessness as expressed in the extract, “examines the meaning of gender in both life and language, stretching the linguistic power of designating identity to its limits” (Monaco 59). Born outside these designating identities with which her parents, family members and neighbours associate a living being, Aftab/Anjum was bound to move outside her family house in search of her true identity, and the Khwabgah, a shelter for the local transgenders, provides her that desired “home”.

Khwabgah—the House of Dreams is largely presented as a binary space for the Duniya—the outside world. It is presented as a world within a world, with its internal dynamics. Roy unfolds the intricacies of this dream-like world where transgenders of different varieties (castrated, not castrated, hermaphrodites, females trapped in male bodies etc) and religions co-exist as a close-knit community. The complexities of the outside world are pushed to the margins inside Khwabgah. Thus, while narrating their public humiliation during the Emergency to her adopted daughter Zainab, Anjum heavily censors the narrative not only because of the immature age of the listener but also because such stories of humiliation are not fit to be recollected in this semi-utopian House of Dreams. To underscore the honour and importance of the Hijra community, myths and pre-colonial past are invoked intermittently.<sup>2</sup> If Gudiya tries to relive the pride of place the transgenders had in *Ramayana*, then pointing out to a giggle of the court eunuch in a Light and Sound show in Red Fort, Ustad Kulsoom Bi states, “[w]hat mattered was that it existed. To be present in history, even as nothing more than a chuckle, was a universe away from being absent from it, from being written out of it altogether. A chuckle, after all, could become a foothold in the sheer wall of the future” (51). For transgenders like Anjum, Khwabgah indeed becomes a site for their azadi as a community, a freedom unsullied until being forced to interact with the unloving Duniya. The experiences of the transgenders both inside the Khawabgah and the Duniya are deliberately juxtaposed by Roy who seems to negotiate “the dynamics between nostalgic recollections of a lost world and present-day struggles for civil rights, and employs the

hijra community as a symbol of vulnerability and sacrifice, a metonymic signifier for India itself” (Monaco 61).

Questions, however, may be raised as to the genuineness of the dreamlike happiness inside Khwabgah. Nimmo Gorakhpuri, an attractive transgender who ran away from Khwabgah, probes deeper and exposes the apparent happiness inside the haveli as a kind of charade. Identifying the hijras as products of divine experimentation to create a “living creature that is incapable of happiness” (23), she unhesitatingly declares the happiness inside Khwabgah as “all sham and fakery” (23). There is a continuous contention of the contraries inside the hybrid selves of the transgenders, never allowing to settle them in peace:

The riot is *inside* us. Indo-Pak is *inside* us. It will never settle down. It *can't*. (23)

Anjum has to leave the shelter of Khwabgah as her experience in an actual riot in the Duniya reactivates the riot within. The resulting trauma creates a friction within her so intense that it was no longer possible for her to live inside Khwabgah. The memory of the synecdoche of horror she witnessed in post-Godhra Gujarat can only be warded off in a graveyard, a shelter for the dead. Trapped between the saffron-clad rioters, Anjum was spared her life paradoxically due to her hijra identity. The collective unconscious of the Indian subcontinent often associates the hijras with magical power, having the ability to bestow luck and fertility on others. As an obverse side to this belief, it was also held that killing a hijra is an extremely bad omen which can bring bad luck for the murderers. Torn between superstition and the frenzy to harm a Muslim-born, the rioters spare Anjum her life but not the humiliation. She is forced to chant the metanarrative of India's grandness surrounded by dead bodies, folded (males) and unfolded (females):

So they stood over her and made her chant their slogans.  
*Bharat Mata Ki Jai! Vande Mataram!* She did. Weeping, shaking,  
humiliated beyond her worst nightmare.  
Victory to Mother India! Salute the Mother!  
They left her alive. Un-killed. Un-hurt. Neither folded nor unfolded. She  
alone. So that *they* might be blessed with good fortune. (62-3)

Though un-killed and un-hurt, Anjum couldn't un-know her experiences in Gujarat. It was a violation of her personal *azadi*, as a minority, as an Indian, as a human. She decides to fight the humiliation by transforming the half-derelict graveyard to the unique Jannat Guest House, a place which offered shelter to any *body* (dead) and anybody (living) who required or wanted it.

If Anjum shows the way a graveyard can upgrade itself to a paradise, then the political atmosphere of post-1947 Kashmir does the reverse by reducing the paradise on earth to graveyards. It is these two graveyards which connect the two strands of the novel. Roy has aptly commented that the novel may be read “as a conversation between two graveyards” (*Azadi* 152) — the *qabristan* in Old Delhi and the graveyard in Kashmir. The political project of turning a paradise into a graveyard can be traced back to 1947; in a way, it would not be wrong to say that the Kashmir problem, especially in its contemporary form, has now entered in its seventy-fifth year. It began when just on the

wake of Independence, Maharaja Hari Singh, the Hindu Dogra king of the princely state of Kashmir, signed the controversial Instrument of Accession with India on 26<sup>th</sup> October, 1947. Though it gave a kind of legitimacy to India's interference and subsequent Occupation in Kashmir, the opinion of the Kashmiri people, majority of whom were Sunni Muslims were not taken into account. Of course, when the Instrument of Accession was signed, it was also decided that it must be ratified by a referendum or plebiscite in the future as per the consensus of the people of Jammu and Kashmir. No such referendum ever took place and over times India claimed that 'such a "reference to the people" had indeed been made through various elections (all to some degree rigged) held in that part of the State of Jammu & Kashmir which it controlled' (Lamb 147). Pakistan initially certain that Kashmir would be added to it after Partition, objected to the entire process and claimed a part of the valley as their own. This led to three major wars between the neighbouring countries. As politics and wars raged on, the valley continued to remain rife with unrest, insurgent activities and insidious mechanisms of government repression. Both India and Pakistan continue to claim the valley as parts of *their* whole and any one opposing the official version on Kashmir is branded as seditious anti-national by their respective countries.<sup>3</sup>

The Kashmir issue has always been one of the major preoccupations of Roy's activist self. In an interview back in 2006, Roy had declared that as an activist-writer, Kashmir is "really a place which gives you an understanding of power, powerlessness, brutality, bravery and the dilemmas of the human condition. I would not want to write a book 'about' Kashmir, I hope Kashmir will be in all the books I write" (*The Shape of the Beast* 244). She is also of the opinion that in post-independence India, it is not easy to talk of the graveyard of Kashmir in the domain of facts. The discourse regarding the ethicality of the Indian Occupation in Kashmir has been espoused by the authorities and believed by the credulous citizens in such a way that any discussion on Kashmir beyond that monolithic discourse will not be considered as truth. However, where facts hesitate to tread, fiction can intrude and Roy makes complete use of this freedom offered by the genre of fiction. She has unequivocally declared that "the enemy of this novel is the idea of 'One nation, one religion, one language'" (*Azadi* 13). The metanarrative of 'Akhand Bharat' or to say what the present dispensation really means 'Akhand Hindu Bharat' doesn't allow for any dissonant voices. If the streets of Srinagar reverberate with slogans like *Azadi ka matlab kya? La ilaha illallah* (What does freedom mean? There is no God but Allah), *Ay jabiron ay zalimon, Kashmir hamara chhod do* (Oh oppressor, oh wicked ones, get out of our Kashmir) or *Jis Kashmir ko khoon se seencha, voh Kashmir hamara hai!* (The Kashmir we have irrigated with our blood that is our Kashmir), the anger and resentment of those voices are made to remain unheard. Roy wants to make us hear those unheard slogans, make us a witness to those unseen processions, make us feel the hitherto unfelt associations. Biplab Dasgupta, an intelligence officer posted in Kashmir was surprised that he could make those associations listening to the continuous chant of 'azadi':

This was different, this Kashmiri chant. It was more than a political demand. It was an anthem, a hymn, a prayer [...]

During those ... occasions when it was in full cry, it had the power to cut through the edifice of history and geography, of reason and politics. It had the power to make even the most hardened of us wonder, even if momentarily, what the hell we are doing in Kashmir, governing a people who hated us so viscerally. (181)

This realization, even if temporary, of a character who has been largely introduced to mimic the official version of the nation-state's justification of the Occupation, certainly exposes the hollowness of the Indian attempt to control the uncontrollable. A loyal government servant, Dasgupta's character often voices the usual distrust against the doubters (like Roy herself) of the metanarrative of Indian nationalism:

I feel a rush of anger at those grumbling intellectuals and professional dissenters who constantly carp about this great country. Frankly, they can only do it because they are allowed to. And they are allowed to because, for all our imperfections, we are a genuine democracy. (147)

In his unguarded moments, Dasgupta exposes the true repressive self of the "genuine democracy" as he slips into confessions like "the protagonists on all sides of the conflict, especially us, exploited this fault line mercilessly. It made for a perfect war – a war that never can be won or lost, a war without end" (181). By making an "Indian" character who is antagonistic to the Kashmir cause, resorting to this kind of rhetorical slippage is deeply suggestive.

Of course, the realities of Occupation in Kashmir are not only limited to the wistful epiphanies of cynical bureaucrats, those also involve large scale repressive measures of the authorities in the valley. Roy has presented the stories of torture, oppression, kidnappings and killings through suggestive snapshots, sparing the details in most cases. Major Amrik Singh and ACP Pinky's zealous 'activities' are mentioned in the natural course of unfolding the events. Murder of civilians is considered as natural as the encounter of terrorists/insurgents. In an unfinished letter to her dead daughter, killed by the shootings of the paranoid Indian army, Musa Yeswi highlights the reality of the graveyard that was Kashmir:

... in our Kashmir the dead will live for ever; and the living are only dead people, pretending. (343)

Musa, a bereaved father and husband and who through natural course of events would join the insurgency in the valley emerges as the representative figure of contemporary Kashmir. A faceless man bearing a charmed life, Musa's (romantic) relation with Tilottama/Tilo is the pivot around which the second half of novel revolves. Despite being admired by Biplab and married to Naga, it is in Musa that Tilo finds her *jouissance*, an "utmost happiness" which is both orgasmic and beyond that. Never an active accomplice in insurgency, Tilo gets embroiled in Musa's war for 'azadi'—a war which is not going to end in a hurry. Her association with Musa will let Tilo internalize the Kashmiri version of English alphabets, the lexicon resounding with everyday experiences unique to the valley. Thus, the corresponding words for the alphabet "a" would be *Azadi*, "b" for *BSF*, "c" for *cross-border*, "d" for *disappeared*, "e" for *encounter* and so on.<sup>4</sup> Musa will die eventually;



younger men more ferocious, more unforgiving will replace him and the war of azadi will be allowed to be continued by all concerned until the self-destruction prophesied by Musa will be fulfilled:

One day Kashmir will make India self-destruct in the same way. You may have blinded all of us, every one of us, with your pellet guns by then. But you will still have eyes to see what you have done to us. You're not destroying us. You are constructing us. It's yourselves that you are destroying. (433-34)

Roy presents more issues and concerns which have the power to implode India from within and she does that by including the micro-stories of a wide assortment of eccentric characters. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* engages with India's Others and the ways in which they "explore creative interstices goaded by the precariousness of the debilitating economic and political structures within which they must survive, and how the novel's representations manage to celebrate their agency without compromising on depicting the bleakness and oppressive landscape of Indian neo-liberalism, poverty, corruption, and suffocating conformity" (Mendes and Lau 74). Kashmir and Central India get connected through the story of the abandoned child in Jantar Mantar. Adopted by Anjum and Tilo and later rechristened as Udaya Jebeen, the girl child was the outcome of vicious gang-rape committed on her Maoist mother by the police. Musa's daughter Miss Jebeen dies but Udaya was allowed to live being loved by her foster parents of the Jannat Guest House. On the other hand, the story of Saddam Hussain takes us again to the heart (or rather the lack of it) of casteist violence after *The God of Small Things*. Roy has time and again expressed her concerns on the alarming rise of Hindu militancy which among other activities has increased the intensity on cow-vigilantism. Since the formation of the BJP government in 2014, intermittent news of frenzied *gau rakshaks* (cow-protectors) lynching the minorities and dalits have been reported from places like Dadri, Kurukshetra, Latehar, Ahmedabad, Una and others. It is this renewed intensity to protect the holy cows that destroyed the family of Saddam who had been born as Dayachand in an untouchable *chamar* family. When Anjum suspects his true identity, he revisits the horror of lynching of his father by a frenzied upper-caste Hindu mob when instigated by the police of his locality. This episode is an obvious nod to the flogging of 7 dalit skimmers by the *gau rakshaks* in July, 2016. Before solemnizing his marriage with Zainab, Saddam revisits the place (now a shopping mall) where his father had been beaten to death only to remind us that the new Shining India is being built on such graveyards where the dead bodies rest buried and forgotten.

In between the publication of her two novels, Roy has produced volumes of essays, most of which are political in nature. Powerful though the essays are, those are also repeatedly criticized for being repetitive, emotional, hyperbolic and mono-dimensional.<sup>5</sup> When *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* was announced, it was anticipated that Roy would allow her seditious heart to speak more freely. However, the novel emerged as both a fictionalized version of her dissenting voice and not exactly that. As she herself clarified that to her "this book is *not* a thinly veiled political essay masquerading as a novel, it is a *novel*" (quoted in S. Manoj 114). The political views are of course there—her critique of the monolithic narrative of the nation's Independence, distrust for the government

mechanisms as well as phoney anti-corruption movements of Anna Hazare, concern on the rise of the political clout of Narendra Modi along with religious fundamentalism, explicit sympathy for the activists and insurgents, all these and more are there but these are all tempered by the implied fictionality of the work. It is true that her almost neurotic distrust against authorities may sometimes be jarring even amidst that implied fictionality. Sameer Rahim is acerbic in his critique for Roy's penchant "to be a megaphone for the voiceless – even if she has, at times, gone too far with her attacks on the Indian state, or been too fair to the Maoist rebels and jihadists who oppose it" (qtd. in Mendes and Lau 74-5). In the novel, she presents the characters in blacks and whites; the insurgents (always righteous) fighting for the just cause are pitted against oppressive state machinery represented by cynical bureaucrats, treacherous informers and sadistic army people. She repeats the forceful misuse of *gayatri mantra* by the saffron parakeets but never cares to mention the practice of the Islamic terrorists in Kashmir and beyond who force their *kafir* victims to recite *kalma* before dispensing with them. The type characters are specifically chosen to foreground her political agenda. She fictionalizes facts—*her* facts—and despite the implied fictionality wants the readers to believe in *her* version of truths.

Having said that, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* also validates the presence of micro-stories where India's Others search for their true identities, and real azadi. To make these micro-stories stand in opposition to the grand narrative of nationalism and Independence, Roy upholds the values of families and imagined utopic communities. Jannat Guest House becomes a space where the eccentrics, misfits, weirdos and abandoned Others come together to form a unique community. As Monaco observes, "the novel begins and ends in a graveyard, such a liminal space seems the emblem of India itself, suspended precariously between life and death, decay and regeneration" (68). The graveyard emerges as kind of microcosm of the Azad India inhabited by the *azad bharatiyas* where freedom and happiness may be achieved, even for a limited time. She wants us to discover this happiness in the liminal space of that graveyard which can be transformed into a (temporary) Paradise rather than in the 'New India' which is busy to project the elixir of Independence through official propaganda and in actuality ghettoizing the entire country into controlled spaces devoid of azadi.

The present paper tried to show how Arundhati Roy in her second novel foregrounds the multiple connotations associated with the term 'azadi' in post-Independence India—freedom from poverty, casteism, patriarchy, homophobia and of course discriminatory majoritarian politics which often manifests in the form of political gaslighting as well as violence. Roy has placed this plurality of azadi *vis-à-vis* the constructed history of valorizing the Independence of the country. As a post-Independence Indian novel, her strategy may not be original but given the contemporary political scenario it has a certain urgency which is often missing in the works of her contemporaries. The novel celebrates the inherent plurality of a country which is now under serious and continuous threat to lose its pluralistic, multicultural identity. Roy has unequivocally challenged the attempt of hijacking the idea of Independence and in course of doing so has mixed her dissent with the implied fictionality of the narrative. This paper was intended as a political reading of the text and while doing so has not only foregrounded the writer's project of exposing the realities of the

present dispensation but has also not failed to point out the way in which her monomania of dissent becomes trapped in the labyrinth of the “truth” she believes in and therefore is also open to challenges and contestations. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* may well be considered as a novel of dissent and the future researchers may take up this idea to interrogate the artful use of the rhetoric of dissent in this novel. In course of doing so they may also compare how that rhetoric has been used differently, both in degree and quality, in Roy’s fictional and non-fictional works. In her discussion with Amy Goodman and Nermeen Sheikh, Roy specifically stated that to her “Tilo, ... is the fictional child of Ammu and Velutha in *The God of Small Things*, had their story ended differently. She’s the younger sibling of Esthappen and Rahel” (n.p). This opens up the possibility of interrogating the commonalities of the female protagonists of Roy’s two novels. This was obviously beyond the scope of the present paper but future researchers may certainly be interested to explore this area of study.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>This must be read in context of young, firebrand Indian student leader Kanhaiya Kumar’s speech that what contemporary India needs is “not Azadi from India, it is Azadi in India”. Quoted in Roy, *Azadi* 158.

<sup>2</sup>See Monaco’s article to read more about Roy’s use of Indian myth or ‘Bharati fantasy’ to highlight the transgender issues in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*.

<sup>3</sup>For the contentious history of the origin of Kashmir problem in the wake of Independence, one may refer to the short but excellent book by Alastair Lamb.

<sup>4</sup>See Roy, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 208-10 for the complete list of Kashmiri-English Alphabet.

<sup>5</sup>Back in 2000, in the columns of *The Hindu*, Ramachandra Guha had dismissed Roy’s brand of activism and her dissenting voice as “self-indulgent”, “hyperbolic” and “unoriginal”. Guha criticized Roy for her naïve proclivity to protest through exaggerations and of the hypocrisy of challenging intolerance through intolerance. This led to an ugly spat between the two in that time.

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