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Creating Herstory: Female Rebellion in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

by

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of the requirements for the degree of  
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Arundhati Roy's debut novel *The God of Small Things* (TGOST) is situated in a small town in Kerala, India and focuses on a well to do Syrian Christian family on the verge of decline. Roy's second novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (Ministry) released 20 years later, is set in the sprawling capital of India, Delhi and introduces us to a cast of characters unrelated by blood. While TGOST is an intimate family portrait, Ministry is set on a grander, national scale. In the novels Roy is not only attempting to give feminist weight to the multiplicity of locations in which gender is articulated by recasting her female characters in their quest for selfhood, she is also focusing on women and women-identified characters as agents of history, thereby contributing to an ongoing project of feminist historiography. As the editors of *South Asian Feminisms* Ania Loomba and Ritty A. Lukose write that "today the need for historical reevaluation remains as important as ever, and feminists are increasingly turning to innovative ways of engaging with history" (*South Asian Feminisms* 6). In her fiction Roy innovates ways of engaging with India's history. Each of her central female characters, Ammu & Rahel in *The God of Small Things* and Anjum & Tilo in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, are

caught in conflict situations and face the brunt of India's cultural and political history on a personal level. For them, history is personal. We discover how these women willfully transgress, choosing to resist historical & culturally prescribed norms of female identity and testing limits of how far to conform, how far to break away, how to overcome a sense of alienation, and how to resolve their identity crises. As these concerns are shaped they showcase Roy as a powerful voice for the rights and subjectivity of women, misfits, the unseen, and marginalized in Indian society.

The heroine of Roy's *The God of Small Things* is Ammu. The narrator never reveals her real name. She is always referred to as Ammu, which means mother, signifying her main identity in the novel is in context to her relationship with others. Foremost, she is the mother of Estha and Rahel and as the novel progresses, wife to Baba, sister to Chacko, daughter to Pappachi and Mammachi, and niece to Baby Kochamma. Yet, she lives her life rebelling against the cultural and patriarchal expectations attached to each role. Ammu belongs to a well-educated orthodox Syrian Christian family of "Anglophiles" where the men are Oxford educated whereas, according to her father, "a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl

(TGOST 38). She first returns to Ayemenem, their small home town in Kerala, after her father's retirement from government service. Like every young girl she waits for marriage proposals while she helps her mother with the housework. "Since her father did not have enough money to raise a suitable dowry, no proposals come Ammu's way"

(TGOST 40). In order to escape Ayemenem, Ammu accepts the marriage proposal of a Bengali Brahmin man whom she meets while attending a cousin's marriage in Calcutta and moves with him to the tea estates in Assam. Having an *intercommunity* love marriage" is the first act of Ammu's rebellion tampering with the laws of ideal good-Indian-girl behavior. Unfortunately, her husband turns out to be "not just a heavy drinker but a full-blown alcoholic with all of an alcoholic's deviousness and charm" (TGOST 40). After the twins are born things get much worse in the marriage. Her husband's alcoholism threatens their financial security. In exchange for job security her husband's English boss proposes that Ammu be "sent to his bungalow to be 'looked after'". Ammu refuses. This causes her husband's drunken badgering and violence to precipitate. Once the violence starts including her young children and "the war with Pakistan began" Ammu leaves her husband and returns, "to her parents in Ayemenem" (TGOST 42).

The war with Pakistan isn't just a historical frame of reference for Arundhati Roy. The Indo-Pakistani War of 1965 was a culmination of skirmishes that took place between Pakistan and India following Pakistan's "Operation Gibraltar", which was designed to infiltrate forces into Jammu and Kashmir to precipitate an insurgency against Indian rule. India retaliated by launching a full-scale military attack on West Pakistan, now Bangladesh. The seventeen-day war caused thousands of casualties on both sides and witnessed the largest engagement of armored vehicles and the largest tank battle since World War II. Roy's reference to the war is meaningful because it signifies the fight that ensues when one man covets what another man has. Ammu's husband wasn't man enough to protect her, so Ammu protected herself and her children. She fought against the threat of forceful encroachment, on her body and her boundaries. There may not have been armies at Ammu's disposal, but she does put "the heaviest book she could find in the bookshelf - *The Reader's Digest World Atlas*" (TGOST 42) to good use when attacking her drunk husband. Leaving her husband is Ammu's way of waging a personal war.

Waging war and taking a stand has repercussions. Lola Chatterjee believes that socio-cultural imperatives

determine gender construction and "in the case of women, these imperatives are especially complex, made up of varying combinations according to religion and community, class and caste, and very significantly in India, women's position within the family (Chatterjee 73). For Ammu, in the hierarchy of the Ipe family, she now occupies the lowest post, even below Baby Kochamma, the unmarried aunt. When Ammu returns to Ayemenem she feels defeated having to return to "everything that she had fled from only a few years ago. Except that now she had two young children. And no more dreams. (TGOST 42). In her haste to get away from her parents and Ayemenem, Ammu's use of marriage as an escape plan has backfired. By returning to the very place she longed to flee she has to face the "constant, high, whining mewl of local disapproval" for, in the eyes of her family and society, she is now a "divorced daughter from a *intercommunity love* marriage" (TGOST 45). According to Ammu her choices and circumstances are now further limited especially as the sole parent and guardian of "two Half-Hindu Hybrids whom no self-respecting Syrian Christian would ever marry" (TGOST 44). Yet, these are brave decisions for Ammu as she takes on the responsibility of raising two small children, divorcing her husband and

returning to an unwelcoming home town and family. They show strength and agency.

What is it that gives Ammu the courage to rebel in such a way? Most women in India, especially in small towns, are taught to live in "mute resignation". To live well behaved, respectable, predictable lives, and most women do. In the intensely personal history of the Ipe family Ammu's rebellious actions certainly change the course of many lives. This rebellion, a refusal to accept gender and social norms, is not only a part of Ammu's innate nature, "she was just that sort of animal" (TGOST 180), it is also ironic. The very forces that try to subdue and control her fuel the rebellious fire within her. Her "effrontery" and disregard for rules stem from an abusive childhood where she witnessed and was subject to humiliation and cruelty at the hands of her upper class, educated, "Anglophile", deranged father. He physically abused his wife and terrorized his daughter while pretending to be the ideal husband and father amidst company.

As she grew older, Ammu learned to live with this cold, calculating cruelty. She developed a lofty sense of injustice and the mulish, reckless streak that develops in Someone Small who has been bullied all their lives by Someone Big. She did exactly nothing to avoid quarrels and confrontations. In fact, it could be argued that she



sought them out, perhaps even enjoyed them. (TGOST 180-182)

Instead of simply accepting the fate that is levied on divorced women with children in small towns, Ammu decides to defy her "man-less" fate and seek out the happiness she deserves. She finds it by having an affair with an untouchable Paravan, Velutha. Beloved by her children as well he is the "God of small things".

Brinda Bose, in her article "In Desire and in Death: Eroticism as Politics in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*" suggests the novel is "a tale not merely of transgressions--and there are so many of them--but also of the processes of desiring that lead to those acts of rebellion." She believes, for Roy, all histories are almost as important as *who* broke the Laws in the first place and takes us back to that particular time when the Laws were made, a time that pre-dates all the histories as we now know them:

To say that it all began when Sophie Mol came to Ayemenem is only one way of looking at it. Equally, it could be argued that it actually began thousands of years ago. Long before the Marxists came. Before the British took Malabar. ... It could be argued that it began long before Christianity arrived in a boat and seeped into Kerala like tea from a teabag. That it really began in the days when the Love Laws were made. The laws that

lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much. (32-33)

The politics of Roy's desires, therefore, have to do with cultural histories and with the ways in which sexuality has been perceived through generations in a society that coded Love Laws with a total disregard for possible anomalies. According to Bose, this is a society that Roy believes bypassed the very importance of *Love* by laying down Laws that dictated who to love, and how much. Roy takes on the histories that perpetuate such Laws, and to read her novel politically one may need to accept that "there are certain kinds of politics that have more to do with interpersonal relations than with grand revolutions, that the most personal dilemmas can also become public causes, that erotics can also be a politics".

To understand Velutha and why Ammu's romance with him is such a transgressive violation of the "love laws" is to first understand the history of his caste and untouchability. In contemporary India an untouchable is usually known as a Dalit. The word Dalit is a vernacular form of the Sanskrit (*dalita*) which means divided, split, broken, scattered. Dalits are at the bottom of India's rigid social order known as the caste system which originated around 7 A.D and each caste has specific duties

and privileges. A person's caste is determined by birth. Dalits were excluded from the four castes of Hinduism instead forming a fifth varna, Panchama. Traditionally, the groups characterized as Dalit were those whose occupations involved tasks considered too menial or degrading to be performed by members of the other castes. These occupations included supposedly polluting activities, like taking life for a living (a category that included, for example, fishermen) killing or disposing of dead cattle or working with their hides for a living, pursuing activities that brought the participant into contact with emissions of the human body, such as feces, urine, sweat, and spittle, a category that included such occupational groups as sweepers and washer men, and eating the flesh of cattle or of domestic pigs and chickens, a category into which most of the indigenous tribes of India fell.

Until the adoption of the new constitution in independent India untouchables were subjected to many social restrictions, which increased in severity from north to south in India. In many cases, they were segregated in hamlets outside the town or village boundary. They were forbidden entry to many temples, to most schools, and to wells from which higher castes drew water. Their touch was seen as seriously polluting to people of higher caste. In

southern India, even the sight of some untouchable groups was once held to be polluting, and they were forced to live a nocturnal existence.

The term Dalit was in use as a translation for the British Raj census classification of Depressed Classes prior to 1935. It was popularized by the Indian economist and reformer B. R. Ambedkar, himself a Dalit. Dalit is also a self-chosen name adopted by Dalit activists who reject the paternalism and casteism of "Untouchables" or the Mahatma Gandhi given term "Harijan" repurposing it instead as a term of resistant collectivity. Due to a push for reforms, in large part initiated by Ambedkar, the 1950 Constitution of India included measures to improve the socioeconomic conditions of Dalits. Aside from banning untouchability, these included a reservation system, a means of positive discrimination that created the classifications of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes (OBCs). Communities that were categorized as being one of those groups were guaranteed a percentage of the seats in the national and state legislatures, as well as in government jobs and places of education. Yet, according to a 2007 report by Human Rights Watch, the treatment of Dalits has been like a "hidden apartheid" and they continue to "endure segregation

in housing, schools, and access to public services". Though the Indian Constitution abolished untouchability, the oppressed status of Dalits remains a reality.

In Roy's novel, Velutha's family belongs to a number of those untouchables who "when the British came to Malabar" "converted to Christianity and joined the Anglican Church to escape the scourge of Untouchability." However, even after a conversion to Christianity they continued to be treated as outcasts with separate churches. After India's independence from the British they were not entitled to "any Government benefits" because "officially, on paper, they were Christians, and therefore casteless. It was a little like having to sweep away your footprints without a broom. Or worse, not being allowed to leave footprints at all" (TGOST 74). Perhaps by depicting an untouchable character like Velutha and not calling him a Dalit, Roy is refusing to rely on Hindu iconography and Sanskrit idioms which inadvertently strengthen communal ideology. She is forcing the reader to not only acknowledge Velutha's caste history but she also wants to bring into focus his subjectivity, to portray him as a human being, who despite political progress for his caste, continues to be discriminated against. By giving Velutha a voice, a body, imbuing him with emotions and desires she is making

visible the current plight of untouchables. She is engaging with a postcolonial feminist movement that, according to Ratna Kapur, is "at an impasse ... because of its ongoing attachment to liberal-colonial notions of historical progress, "rights" and "equality" (*South Asian Feminisms*, 6). Through the breaking of Velutha's body by the very state forces that are meant to protect its citizens Roy is exposing India's failure to provide promised equality and freedom to a member of a historically disenfranchised class.

Velutha, the "God of small things," is an untouchable "Paravan with a future" (TGST 119). Even before his affair with Ammu, Velutha tries to progress into the seemingly modern world of industry and equality via communism. But he is limited. He is fatally betrayed by a community, including his father, that will not let him rise above his caste. Velutha is aware of the danger that lies in having an affair with someone from an upper caste, which is why, initially, he tries to hate Ammu since she represents all that threatens his attempts at progress. "*She's one of them*, he told himself. *Just another one of them*. [But] He couldn't. ... Madness slunk in through a chink in History" (TGST 214). Velutha gives in to his desire for Ammu because he realizes she is not just "another one" of a higher caste

nor simply the mother of the children he loves. She is also a woman and a sexual being. He understands that "she had gifts to give him too" (TGOST 176-77). Velutha, by being with Ammu can attain a kind of freedom denied to him so far since in her eyes he is not an untouchable but a man, a sexual being, and an equal. They both have something to give each other.

Ammu, when she sees Velutha playing with her daughter Rahel, realizes Velutha is no longer the little boy she remembered growing up with who offered her gifts placed flat on his palm so she wouldn't have to touch him. "She wondered at how his body had changed - so quietly, from a flat muscled boy's body into a man's body. Contoured and hard. A swimmer's body. A swimmer-carpenter's body" (TGST 175). She finds herself desiring him. "She longed for him. Ached for him with the whole of her biology" (TGST 330). In an interview for a local Indian paper, when asked about the character of Velutha, Roy recalls that in Kerala, Dalit men labor bare-bodied. "In that parochial, sexually inhibited community, one sees bare, male Dalit bodies all the time." She found them beautiful because these bodies are formed by labor. But to upper caste people, men as well as women, those bodies don't exist. They are no threat to anybody. They don't see untouchables as physical, leave alone sexual

beings. According to Roy, "it's as though in that society caste-prejudice overcomes human biology and desire." Roy's noticing, describing and writing about the untouchable body on purpose and having Ammu, an upper caste Syrian Christian woman, desire and make love to Velutha is a political and provocative act. Furthermore, lust isn't the only reason Ammu is drawn to Velutha. She also senses a common ground with him. "She hoped that under his careful cloak of cheerfulness, he housed a living, breathing anger against the smug, ordered world that she so raged against. She hoped it had been him" (TGST 176) in the Communist march. Ammu is looking for a connection with another human being who understands what it means to be angry at an unjust world that seems determined to keep everyone in his/her place. It is not compassion or pity that attracts Ammu to Velutha. It is not subservience that delivers Velutha to Ammu. It is Ammu's anger at the society she lives in and is shunned by that seeks out and recognizes Velutha's anger. They are united in anger as much as in love.

Ammu's economically and socially marginalized "man-less woman" status makes her, like Velutha, another "untouchable" within the "touchable" community. Viewed by society and her family as a "*divorced daughter* having no position anywhere at all" (TGOST 45) Ammu understands the



social position of women like her in India and the shared similarity with untouchables. Both are marginalized and unseen with no position in society. Discrimination and victimization faced by both makes their union almost inevitable. In her attempt to explore the realm of freedom, even if of a sexual nature, she provides a space for Velutha, and herself, to experience equality. By framing her own love laws Ammu facilitates a freedom that society has failed to provide both her and Velutha, while disrupting the centuries of social, religious, and caste hierarchical structures:

The man caught Ammu's gaze. Centuries telescoped into one evanescent moment. History was wrong-footed, caught off guard. Sloughed off like an old snakeskin. It's marks, its scars, its wounds, from old wars and the walking backward days fell away ... In that brief moment, Velutha looked up and saw things that he hadn't seen before. Things that had been out of bounds so far, obscured by history's blinders. (TGOST 176)

Smothered by social injustice, Ammu, by being with Velutha is rebelling against the very social norms that constitute the Syrian Christian community in Kerala. This rebellion is an act of resistance against the very foundations of Indian society. It becomes a transgressive act. Ammu's being with an untouchable lover is breaking history's "love laws" which "lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much"

(TGOST 177). Even though, initially, Velutha may have had some misgivings about being with Ammu she does not brook refusal. Being with Velutha is her chance to reclaim her body, her womanhood, find joy and pleasure, and to be rid of, no matter how briefly, the historically limiting labels that dictate her and Velutha's life in a small town.

Finally, when Velutha meets her halfway it is Ammu who instigates their lovemaking. *She* went to him. "He just stood there. He didn't touch her." *She* put her arms around him, *she* unbuttoned his shirt. She put out her tongue and tasted his Paravan smell "that so disgusted Baby Kochamma. Ammu put her tongue out and tasted it." She pulled his head down towards her and kissed his mouth. "A cloudy kiss. A kiss that demanded a kiss-back (TGOST 334 - 335).

Unfortunately, both lovers pay a heavy price for this disruption of history's "love laws" leading to a physical death for Velutha and a slow mental and physical deterioration for Ammu. One could even say their individual deaths is too heavy a price considering the shame, guilt and trauma faced by Ammu and her twins. But as Brinda Bose suggests:

To lunge, knowingly and deliberately, for what one must not have ... is to believe that the very process of the pursuit would render the ultimate penalty worthwhile. To know that there may be death at the end of it -

and still to desire - is not necessarily to accept a just punishment but to believe that such a death is not a shame and a defeat ... the choices of those who desire (and perhaps die for it) are deliberate; the options have been weighed, and the transgressive experience valued above its possible penalty. The politics lie in the choices. (Bose 70)

Ammu makes a deliberate choice that disrupts an unjust, discriminating history, perpetrating an act of resistance aimed at bringing about change. That is why she goes to the police station and argues against the detention of Velutha. She is the rebel who represents a feminist defiance of the present state of society. She stands for those women who are aspiring for freedom and equality and challenging traditional ideas and conventions. The hopes for the future lie in such women. In short, Roy represents Ammu's character as a feminist. She is a woman who resists oppressive and repressive social and political structures to provide brief but meaningful moments in her and Velutha's pursuit for happiness and emancipation. Through Ammu and Velutha, Roy is representing a renewed engagement with local pasts, an articulation of local differences and using them to yield radical ways of conceptualizing gender, identity, and freedom. She is also asking the reader to question and break history's "love laws. That lay down who

should be loved. And how. And how much" (TGOST 328) no matter what the consequences.

The consequences faced by Ammu and Velutha have a ripple effect on Ammu's children. They are 'Dizygotic' twins born from separate but simultaneously fertilized eggs. After Velutha's death, her son Estha is returned to his father. Her daughter Rahel is put in the care of her uncle Chacko and her grandmother Mammachi, who take care of her basic needs but withdraw any genuine concern. Given this lack of affection or real attention, Rahel drifts through a polite but friendless childhood "(from school to school) into womanhood." She rebels by refusing to conform to behavior expected from Indian girls. It was "*as though she didn't know how to be a girl*" (TGOST 16). She is expelled three times for her behavior which "appeared to be a civil, solitary form of corruption" (TGOST 16). In college "the other students, particularly the boys, were intimidated by Rahel's waywardness and almost fierce lack of ambition. They left her alone" (TGOST 17). She lacks appreciation, nor does she care for social or romantic acceptance. According to the narrator,

Oddly, neglect seemed to have resulted in an accidental release of the spirit. Rahel grew up without a brief. Without anybody to arrange a marriage for her. Without anybody who pay her a dowry and therefore without an

obligatory husband looming on her horizon. So as long as she wasn't noisy about it, she remained free to make her own enquiries: ... Into life and how it ought to be lived. (17)

Through Rahel, Roy is suggesting that neglect results in a freedom from patriarchy. Since Rahel doesn't have a prescribed brief or insistence from anyone on how to live her life as a woman in India she isn't bound by the rules of family or society that dictate what her choices "ought to be". She is simply free to make her own choices and break the rules. Her rootlessness, economically, financially, in terms of family, lineage (child of a divorced inter-faith couple) and culture demands that she doesn't have anyone to fall back on. Rahel has to rely on herself to make sense of her world, to make inquiries into how to live her life, and even to arrange her own partners. As she floats through life spending "eight years in college without finishing the five-year undergraduate course and taking her degree" (TGOST 17) she drifts into marriage to an American. The marriage ends in divorce. Her only real connection is with her dizygotic twin brother Estha. The narrator acknowledging the twins connection foretells, "the emptiness in one twin was only a version of the quietness in the other. That the two things fitted together Like stacked spoons. Like familiar lovers' bodies" (TGOST

20). Growing up together Estha and Rahel thought of themselves together as "Me, and separately, individually, as We or Us. As though they were a rare breed of Siamese twins, physically separate, but with joint identities." This connection the twins have with each other makes them, in essence, "one" and even though they don't look alike, "they had "the single Siamese soul" (TGOST 41). "He was the one that she had known before Life began.

When Rahel hears of Estha's return to their maternal home town she too returns to Ayemenem, like her mother Ammu, after a divorce, and discovers an unwelcoming environment and no hint or recognition from her twin. "Their lives have a size and shape now. Estha has his and Rahel hers ... and they are as old as Ammu when she died. Thirty one / Not old. / Not young./ But a viable die-able age." It is Rahel who crosses the divide which time and silence has created between them. She understands the role history has played in their lives and how both of them have grappled with the pain of what they witnessed as children. "Human history, masquerading as God's Purpose, history in live performance ... in the back verandah of the History House." How the "posse of Touchable Policeman" beat to death their beloved Velutha, "a man they and their mother weren't supposed to love" (TGST 319). Rahel "turns to

Estha in the dark" (TGOST 327) and says his name. Hearing his name, an acknowledgment of his identity from a person whom he loves and loves him, is a part of his "Siamese soul", proves to be the break in his self-protective shell. Both of them can finally acknowledge the emotional scars of their shared history and of being separated from the ones you love. Estha reaches out to touch Rahel's mouth that formed his name, which looks so much like "their beautiful mother's mouth". Making the first move, Rahel then holds Estha's hand and kisses it. Just like in the history of their mother, who made the first move on Velutha, *Rahel* is the one who puts her arms around Estha and draws "him down beside her" and what happens next is "Nothing (that in Mammachi's book) would separate Sex from Love. Or Needs from Feelings" (TGST 328). It symbolizes a defiance of the universal (not just national or caste-ist) prohibition of incest. In that act of sex and love Rahel has broken down the gender binary. They are not just "a sister a brother. A woman a man. A twin a twin" (TGOST 93) they are now one. Their incestuous act is not just a balm to soothe their pain. It is also a transgression, a breaking of the laws that limit sexuality. This act is Roy's attempt to question the validity of man-made, societally constructed boundaries and codes that criminalize and penalize any form of love

that doesn't fit into traditional definitions of 'normal'. Which goes against what people "ought to" do but nevertheless has the power to heal. "There were tears ... what they shared that night was not happiness, but hideous grief" (TGOST 328).

Ultimately, Ammu and Rahel are Roy's hope for modern India, which is ready to abandon antiquated notions of who can love whom, and how, and how much. Their modern spirit cannot be quelled by convention, family, history, state, or even death. As critic Brinda Bose suggests, their "sublimely erotic experience is also the pursuit of a utopia in which ideas and ideals, greater than what a momentary sexual pleasure offers, coalesce." They have the courage to look the past in the eye and repurpose that same history house to meet their needs. Roy deliberately ends *The God of Small Things* with the word, "Tomorrow." Though it echoes sadly since the reader knows Ammu and Velutha have no future to look forward to, nevertheless it expresses a hope in a more distant future, when future generations will at last have managed to do away with stultifying fantasies of purity, imposing in their place hybridity and the limitless potentialities of bastardy. The two types of love scenes in her debut novel show that Roy is not interested in a purely abstract questioning of the origins and validity of the Law,



and especially of the universal taboo against incest. On the contrary she is very committed to seeing a change in the enduring injustices and the sheer waste of human potential linked to caste prejudice, therefore she is committed simply to social progress. For Roy, "Tomorrow" (TGOST 340) will not come from liberalism but from those free souls who have rage and anger enough within them, and courage enough, to place themselves on the dangerous edge of things. Progress will come from those courageous souls, helped and encouraged by the potent voice of literature.

*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* finds Roy recasting feminist figures from her debut novel and taking on the concept of gender and its performativity as a socially constructed concept. The novel begins with the story of Anjum, a hermaphrodite. She is named Aftab at birth and raised as a boy in a family with royal, Islamic, lineage. From an early age Aftab doesn't fit traditional molds because he is born different, neither fully male nor female and defies singular gender categories. Instead of being drawn to male virtues of valor and strength as recounted by his poet father, he finds more intriguing the female aspect of history. When Aftab finds that his beautiful, feminine singing voice is the cause of teasing from other children, he is confused and retreats into a self-protective shell

refusing to go to school or sing (and be further tormented by children who don't quite understand what he is.) "He's a She. He's not a He or a She. He's a He and a She. She-He, He-She" (Ministry 16). Aftab's salvation comes to him like a vision when he first lays eyes on a fascinating creature, a tall, slim-hipped woman, wearing bright lipstick, gold sandals, and a shiny green shalwar kameez. The woman is actually a man dressed as a woman. When Aftab first sees Bombay Silk "whatever she was, Aftab wanted to be her" because "no ordinary woman would have been permitted to sashay down the streets of Shahjahanabad dressed like that." The woman Aftab follows could dress as she was dressed and walk the way she did only because "she wasn't a woman" (Ministry 22). She had freedom that wasn't available to the women in Muslim community. Gender rules don't seem to apply to Bombay Silk and finally Aftab has an alternative, an answer to the question of his true sex. Through Bombay Silk, a 'hijra' he now has access to "another universe" (Ministry 29). At the age of fifteen he willfully gives up the community, gender, history, and lineage he has known so far and makes a deliberate choice to enter what seems to him the "gates of Paradise" (24). "Khwabgah - The House of Dreams" (Ministry 23) presided over by Ustad Kulsoom Bi, which is also home to seven other

Hijras: Bulbul, Razia, Heera, Baby, Nimmo, Gudiya, and Mary. All of them are born male, more or less, and all of them want to be women, or feel that they already are. Some have had their genitals surgically altered; others not. They make their living mainly as prostitutes. After choosing this subaltern community of misfits, who, like him, are neither he nor she as his alternative family, "Aftab became Anjum" (Ministry 29). The consequence of his choice leads to the loss of his biological family. Even though his mother keeps in touch with him "surreptitiously," his father "Mulaqat Ali for his part was less able to accept the situation. His broken heart never mended... He chose to sever all ties with his son" (Ministry 29).

There is a significance to Arundhati Roy choosing Anjum, a hermaphrodite or Hijra, as a central character in her second novel. In India, hijras, people who, though biologically male, feel they are female, and dress and act as women, constitute a long-recognized subculture. They are seen, talked about, feared, and even persecuted but are generally "unseen" choosing to live in the shadows of their own small communities or "gharanas". They go out in pairs or a group to beg thus guaranteeing safety and income. They are slowly edging their way toward acceptance, as a "third

sex." They have the right to vote in India (as of 1994). In 1998, India's first hijra M.P., Shabnam (Mausi) Bano, forty years old, took her seat in the state assembly of Madhya Pradesh. Not unlike untouchables, Hijras also have legal rights. As for how Hijras function poetically in storytelling, from tales of the Mughal era to Mahabharata onward, they are relegated to fantasy, a "chuckle", and high color. Hijras themselves contribute to this tradition, to this version of their history in India. As Roy presents the situation in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* it was Kulsoom Bi's tradition to initiate new members of the Hijra community by taking them to see the Sound and Light Show "an old-government-approved version ... of the history of the Red Fort and the emperors who ruled from it for more than two hundred years" (Ministry 54). As she heard the "clearly audible, deep, distinct, rasping, coquettish giggle of a court eunuch" she would use it as proof of the importance of Hijras of Shahjahanabad's, insisting "That is us. That is our ancestry, our history, our story. We were never commoners, you see, we were members of the staff of the Royal Palace." Kulsoom Bi's insistence on the importance of the third sex in India's gloried royal history is her way of finding solace, a toe-hold, recalling a prescribed place in the history of a country that prefers

not to acknowledge their presence at all. For, as the narrator of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* points out, "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" (Ministry 55).

In Roy's *House of Dreams*, 'Khwabgah' is "a place where special people, *blessed* people, came with their dreams that could not be realized in the Duniya ... Holy Souls trapped in the wrong bodies were liberated" (Ministry 58). There Roy's Anjum starts out as fanciful and fun. She wears heavy elaborate make-up, sequined saris, is sought after by the press, and is known for her pleasure giving skills. She goes on to become a mother of a lost orphan, almost gets killed by a mob during the Gujarat riots but is spared because killing a Hijra is considered bad luck. "They left her alive. Unkilled, Unhurt. Neither folded nor unfolded. She alone. So that *they* might be blessed with good fortune (Ministry 67).

Witnessing the Gujarat riots turns out to be a pivotal point in Anjum's life. Again, India's history intersects with the personal life of Roy's characters. The 2002 Gujarat riots were a three-day period of inter-communal violence in the western Indian state of Gujarat. Following the initial incident there were further outbreaks

of communal riots against the minority Muslim population in the state for the next year. According to official figures, the riots ended with 1,044 dead, 223 missing, and 2,500 injured. Of the dead, 790 were Muslim and 254 Hindu. Anjum despite being a Muslim under attack by a Hindu mob thirsty for blood was spared death. "She alone" because of her third-sex status. The enormity of the realization stuns even Anjum. Rescued from a refugee camp she is brought back to Khwabgah and finds she no longer fits into her old life and the world of Hijras any longer. "Her quietness gave way to something else, something restless and edgy. It coursed through her veins like an insidious uprising, a mad insurrection against a lifetime of spurious happiness she felt she had been sentenced to" (Ministry 61). She incinerates the seemingly frivolous tokens of her past life and moves out of the Khwabgah and into a graveyard, entering "once again ... another world" (Ministry 62) determined to build another life for herself. This time Anjum chooses to be closer to her biological family, or at least their final resting place. She moves into a graveyard where "several generations of Anjum's family were buried" (Ministry 65). A place where the living and the dead co-exist.

"Jannat" is an important place, where Anjum creates a safe place, with the help of a motley band of supporters who all contribute in their individual way in the creation of a sort of utopia, an imaginary yet perfect place for society's misfits and a haven for outcasts. Anjum welcomes "down-and-out travelers" (Ministry 72) as well as a Hijras who, for one reason or another, had fallen out of, or been expelled from, the tightly administered grid of Hijra Gharanas (Ministry 73). She starts conducting funerals for those whom other graveyards have rejected. In creating "Jannat Guest House and Funeral Services" Anjum has created a space that catches those who fall off the grid, for whom family, society, religion, caste, and class no longer holds any meaning. They don't belong. Anjum understands what it's like to not fit in anywhere, or belong and how difficult it would have been for her had she not found a like-minded, broken-bodied, complicated community of misfits that accepted her, encouraged her, or simply, provided her shelter and space to be true to herself. She understands the importance of like wanting to be around like. Anjum tells Saddam Hussain, the second permanent resident of Jannat (an untouchable) that "once you have fallen off the edge like all of us have ... you will never stop falling. And as you fall you will hold on to other falling people ... This

place where we live, where we have made our home, is the place of falling people. Here there is no *hageeqat*. Arre, even we aren't real. We don't really exist" (Ministry 88). Anjum is referring to the hookers, transgenders, untouchables, the broken, the lost, and the insane, that is, the voiceless and the unseen. They don't really exist or are tolerated, discriminated against, humiliated, and the unseen in India. In Roy's world these people do exist. They live, work, and are buried with respect and a prayer. These souls try their best to quell the demons of their histories and survive, all the while holding on to and providing support to others just like them. Anjum, by providing a space that welcomes such people, is true to her name. She is proud to proclaim, "I am Anjuman. I'm a *mehfil*, I'm a gathering. Of everybody and nobody, of everything and nothing... Everyone's invited" (Ministry 8). Anjum is Roy's depiction of the essence of a sexually radical and economically autonomous subject who practices inclusivity, acceptance, and selfhood. It is also lucky that, at least in Roy's fictional world people like Anjum and her 'Jannat Guest House' exist, because without them Baby Jabeen II and her kidnapper Tilo wouldn't have survived or thrived.



*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is home to another female character who refuses to fit traditional gender stereotypes. Tilo, or S. Tilotama, is an architect-turned-activist whose reserved nature keeps her mysterious and distant— an ideal keeper of smuggled files, eyewitness testimonies and notebooks that document the travesties committed against citizens of Kashmir as the state fought for secession from India. Tilo is “a bit of a mystery.” When asked what the S. in her name stands for, she replies, “S stands for S” (Ministry 158). Tilo doesn’t feel the need to elaborate because part of her identity is missing. Tilo herself may be unaware of half of her history, her lineage, on her father’s side. As part of the gossip surrounding Tilo, the reader learns that she is an illegitimate child born out of wedlock to an upper caste Syrian Christian woman who had a love affair with a man who belonged to an “untouchable caste” (a Paravan) man in a small town in Kerala. There had been a scandal, and the man had been “dispensed with in the way high-caste families in India - in this case Syrian Christian from Kerala - traditionally dispense with inconveniences such as these.” Tilo’s mother was sent away until the baby was born and placed in a Christian orphanage. In a few months she returned to the orphanage and adopted her own child. Her family disowned

her. She remained unmarried. To support herself she started a small kindergarten school, in the same small town she was born in, which over the years, grew into a successful high school. However, Maryam Ipe, Tilo's guardian never publicly admitted that she was Tilo's real mother. In essence, Tilo is "a girl who didn't have a past, a family, community, a people, or even a home" (Ministry 159). She didn't belong anywhere or to anyone. Tilo was "absolutely alone" (Ministry 164)

She differs from the norm, which is subtly evident even in her appearance. Her dark complexion, "which, as far as most Indians were concerned, disqualified her straightaway from being considered good-looking" (Ministry 156). She carried herself in a particular way "that was almost masculine, and yet wasn't." She wore minimal jewelry and smoked "Ganesh beedis that she kept in a scarlet Dunhill cigarette packet" (Ministry 157). This duplicity wasn't to impress people because whenever someone asked to share her cigarettes, she did and didn't comment on the borrower's disappointment when they got a cheap substitute for what they thought would be an imported cigarette. In Tilo the "complete absence of desire to please, or put anyone at their ease, could in a less vulnerable person, have been construed as arrogance. In her it came across as

a kind of reckless aloneness" (Ministry 158). According to (her husband of short duration) Naga, "the credit for Tilo's individuality, her quirkiness and unusualness, regardless of which school you subscribed to, nature or nurture- went straight to her mother" (Ministry 244).

Significantly, the story of Tilo's mother seems to be a revisionist history and re-casting of Ammu's story in Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Had Ammu lived, Tilo would have been the love child of Ammu and her untouchable lover, Velutha. Thus, Tilo is recast as well. There are similarities between Ammu and Tilo's Mother Maryam Ipe who is named while Ammu is not. By naming Tilo's mother Roy is fleshing out, finally, and naming the success that Ammu could have achieved had she found the strength to stand up to society the way Maryam Ipe does. Maryam, like Ammu, belonged to an old, aristocratic Syrian Christian family that had fallen on bad times. Two generations of the family - her father and her brother - had graduated from Oxford and she herself had been educated at a convent school. Maryam Ipe's story diverges when, unlike Ammu who wasn't allowed to continue her education, Maryam attended a Christian college in Madras, after which her father's illness forced her to return to her home town in Kerala. She began her professional career as an English teacher at

a local school, and then started her own extremely successful school known for its innovative teaching methods. (Ammu wanted to start a school as well but never could). The newspaper articles about Ms. Ipe told the story of a woman who had overcome great adversity in her early life to become what she was - an iconic feminist who never moved to a big city but chose instead to take the hard path and continue to live and fight her battles in the conservative town she belonged to. Maryam eventually won the respect and admiration of those who had tormented her and became an inspiration to a whole generation of young women to follow their dreams and desires. The narrator presents the reader with a version of Tilo's mother's actions after Tilo's birth as a courageous act:

Even if it was true that Tilo was her real child whom she would not publicly acknowledge, it was equally true that for a young woman who belonged to a traditional community, to have chosen a life of independence, chosen to eschew marriage in order to claim a child born to her out of wedlock - even if meant masking in benevolence and masquerading as the baby's foster-mother- was an act of immense courage and love. She needed to distance herself from her baby if only in order to be able to claim her, own her and love her. (Ministry 244)

There is certainly courage in what Maryam Ipe did in the conscious choice she made. But by refusing to acknowledge

Tilo as her biological child she also caused Tilo to feel anchorless and alone and affected her ability to love. Maryam's self-created distance for the sake of social norms, a singular personal agenda, has a detrimental effect on the decisions Tilo makes in her own adult life and personal relationships. For instance, Tilo only ever loved one man but their love survives only because there was always a physical distance between them. They met in college and Musa is a Kashmiri. He is the only one Tilo can be completely herself with. He is fighting for a cause he believes in in Kashmir while Tilo remains in Delhi. The physical distance from Musa is the only way she can really love him. There is always a silent distance no matter how intimate they get. It's what she knows through conditioning received while growing up with her emotionally distant mother who refused to ever acknowledge her as her biological child. Musa and Tilo never marry. Musa gets married to a Kashmiri woman. He eventually has a daughter but loses his family during separatist clashes in Kashmir. The loss of his family is another point of connection between two lost souls who are looking for meaning and justice, but each have to fight their own battles. After a brief tryst where she finally meets Musa after a long separation, she is immediately involved in a close

encounter with the Indian security forces in Kashmir where Tilo faces a harrowing and humiliating experience at the hands of a female interrogator that leaves her traumatized. Even though she tries to find solace and protection with Naga, which is why she agrees to marry him, "she gave the impression of being utterly, unreachably alone, even at her own wedding" (Ministry 187). Tilo soon realizes marriage to Naga is against her nature. If it were up to her, she would never get married because she "Wanted to be free to die irresponsibly, without notice and for no reason" (Ministry 163). Her decision to leave Naga after her mother's death is a very bold decision for a woman who has no one to turn to.

Roy by presenting Tilo's saving grace for her sacrifices (for Musa and for the Kashmiri cause) by guarding the copious paperwork in her apartment is attempting to show the importance of archiving evidence of the unofficial narratives ignored by history and the headlines. By doing so she is preserving the memory of the people involved in the struggle while using it as security against erasure, revision and forgetting.

To preserve something precious against the threat of erasure is also one of the reasons Tilo decides to kidnap an abandoned baby girl from Jantar Mantar (the historical

landmark which is also the official site of protests in Delhi). When the chance presented itself, "She had no idea why she of all people, who never wanted children, had picked up the baby and run. But now it was done. Her part in the story had been written. But not by her" (Ministry 263). On a more intimate level, Tilo's choosing to rescue the new born baby girl is a willful act that shows her attempting to correct the humiliation and pain of never being acknowledged by her own mother. It is not necessarily a biological maternal instinct that compels Tilo to take the baby, but rather a volition to spare a child an uncertain, unprotected, and unloved future. Once Tilo is certain the baby girl will receive the love, care, and acknowledgment she needs, she has no qualms about giving up her rights to the child. Her role in the baby's life was written for a specific purpose and by historical instinct she performs it. Just like the baby who is abandoned by her mother but welcomed as the newest resident of Jannat Tilo too finds a place where she finally fits in and has found a home. "For the first time in her life, Tilo felt that her body had enough room to accommodate all its organs ... Instinct told her that she may finally have found a home for the Rest of Her Life" (Ministry 310).

In both her novels Roy is giving voice to strong female characters who refuse to be limited by their gender or circumstances. She begins her storytelling by situating it in a small, local community in which space and acceptance for the different is limited. Ammu, the rebel, in *The God of Small Things* doesn't survive, dying sick and alone, because she couldn't find a like-minded community of people who accepted her or the choices she made. Her legacy manifests itself in the actions of her daughter who wanders but ultimately returns to the small town in search of a connection, which she finds with her twin brother. Their incestuous union is not only a balm for their shared history of violence and emotional pain but also the coming together of two like and lost souls in search of a release. Roy's ending her first novel with the word "tomorrow" leads us to the sprawling, national landscape of India in her second novel. It harkens the necessity for acceptance, community, and space that welcomes all those who feel different. A place where differences are celebrated and find a happy home.

In a recent interview for the Financial Times Arundhati Roy speaking about her *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* said, "the radical act is utmost happiness." "Utmost sadness, we all know about. But the real victory



is, can you come out of that with an understanding of how to be, at least occasionally, happy? To me that's very important, extremely so." For Roy, the characters in her latest book, like Anjum aren't dropouts – "just off-grid. All of them have an incendiary border running through them, of gender, of caste, of religious conversion". Roy has spent years tracking the "very free and fierce women" who protest and through their protest find a space for themselves to be happy and lead accomplished lives. For Roy, these are victories, "little islands which can and should be created". She's sharply aware that many women don't have the power to shape their lives or exercise their own choices, particularly in India and she reflects that in her work. But she rejects the idea that strong, unconventional women should suffer. When women have power, they should use it. "I think when you do make that choice, you create more and more space for other women." The characters in Roy's novels might be seen as embodying an extension/representation of the values with which Roy leads her life. The freedom of living alone, if "on a raft of love" from friends; the freedom from authority; owning a house not bought with her father's money because "there was no father, really", and finally becoming comfortable with both fame and notoriety. In her closing, the author of the

article comments on Roy's beauty. She says when one meets Roy in person one comes away with something more distinct: "Roy radiates a power that has its roots in radical openness, a stubborn, probably lifelong drive towards independence in all its forms." The author ends by quoting Roy who says she doesn't want to be "anonymous, because other women should know you can do this". "You can be happy, you can take the f\*\*\*ing space." Arguably Roy's fiction pushes the feminist agenda forward and features characters who dare to be different, do not succumb to the burden of their history, nor the demands of socially dictated cultural and gender norms. Instead, like Roy herself, they create a space for themselves, write their own stories and enjoy the contentment that comes with living life on one's own terms. Additionally, by exposing the workings of gender binaries, communalism, or casteism, instead of simply presenting women, Muslims, Christians, and Dalits as marginalized objects Roy presents them instead as *subjects*. Through a character like Anjum, who is considered a third sex, Roy is creating an alternative view of the conceptual categories of gender and sexuality, which according to Mrinalini Sinha "liberates gender from its unnecessary association with any one parochial history, it becomes newly available for a reinvigorated feminist theory

and praxis" (South Asian Feminisms 358). Ultimately, as Anjum, at the end of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* looks back with "a sense of contentment and accomplishment" so can her feminist creator Arundhati Roy. As for the future, even the smallest creature knows, "things would turn out all right in the end. They would because they had to. Because Miss Jebeen, Miss Udaya Jabeen, was come" (Ministry 444). The future, according to Ms. Roy, is female and one can certainly rejoice at the thought.

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