



## Sexuality and Love in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

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### Abstract:

Arundhati Roy in her novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* has talked about numerous socio-political issues as the novel is set against the background of the Indo Pakistan riot. It revolves around a character named Anjum, also known as Aftab who is a hermaphrodite, and through her Roy portrays the third gender of the

Indian society. The novel traces the life of Anjum and how she was able to break the misconception and the stereotyping of the hijras. This paper aims to explore the themes of love and sexuality which are vividly portrayed in Arundhati Roy's novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. The major characters in the novel struggle to find a sense of belongingness and acceptance in the world which is divided in the name of gender, sexuality, class, politics etc. This paper analyses the psychological trauma and the complexity in the relationships of the two major characters Anjum and Tilo.

**Keywords:** Sexuality, love, belongingness, queer.

Pramod K. Nayar in his book *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory* says that, "sexuality, strangely, has been seen as a category that exists only in the form of the man-woman relationship" (185). It is because of this reason that the relationship which crosses the boundary of man-woman relation is considered to be queer. Sexuality itself seems to be very complex. Sexuality is believed to define the sexual identity of an individual. However, based on what Judith Butler has to say about the inner self and the outer self, an individual's sexual identity cannot be defined based on his/her sexuality. In this regard R. Raj Rao says, "I call sexuality a social construct because it is society that expects a male (a state of being) to grow into a man (a state of becoming)". (2)

Sexuality and love are connected to each other in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Love is one of the major themes in Roy's novel. While there are characters like Anjum whose sexual identity exceeds beyond the conventional norm, there are also characters like Tilo, Saddam and others who fall under the category of the so called conventional norm of sexuality.

Arundhati Roy has portrayed different characters with different sexual preferences in order to depict the "gender reality". In the novel, same sex love is depicted for the first time through Hazrat Sarmad Shaheed. Jahanara Begum, Aftab's mother takes her baby to

his dargah with the hope of getting him 'cured'. The novel says that there were mysteries behind the identity of Hazrat Sarmad Shaheed and that not all visitors to his dargah knew his story. "Some knew parts of it and some made up their own versions. Most knew he was a Jewish American merchant who had travelled to Delhi from Persia in pursuit of the love of his life. Few knew the love of his life was Abhay Chand, a young Hindu boy he had met in Sindh" (9). Sarmad here is a real person who has also been mentioned in the book *Same Sex Love: A Literary History* by Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai. Kidwai writes that:

*According to the biography of Sarmad published by the keepers of his shrine, Sarmad first saw the young Abhai Chand when he was singing a ghazal at the poets' gathering. Sarmad was smitten by his beauty. Abhai Chand responded warmly: 'For some days this attraction continued from afar. Eventually the sparks of this fire were fanned by flames of love and it began to blaze and Abhai Chand began staying with Sarmad'. (178)*

By introducing this character towards the beginning of the novel, Roy also indicates what is to come in the later part of the novel. Though Arundhati Roy has not portrayed woman-woman relationship, she had portrayed man-man relationships as well as man-woman relationship in the novel. The major characters in the novel are people who has been bent and broken and are in need of love. Love is the only source of hope for them in the midst of all brokenness and it acts as a medium of healing for all that they have undergone.

Roy has portrayed how apart from all the sexual indifferences between the so called normal people and the queer people, love is the one thing that is common between them. Anjum was considered to be a man by her parents and the society, but she felt like a woman from inside. Anjum, though a homosexual with a male body and a woman's soul wishes to have a child of her own. Her dream became a reality when she found Zainab. "Zainab was Anjum's only love" (30). She found Zainab on steps of Jama Masjid and guessed that

she was about three years old. Over the week announcements were made in different mosques several times a day but no one came forward to claim the child. This made Anjum to believe that she was abandoned. Anjum named her Zainab and the child started calling Anjum 'Mummy'.

The arrival of the child brought immense change not only in the life of Anjum but also in *Khwabgah*. The physical appearance of *Khwabgah* itself had changed. "The *Khwabgah* was in better condition than it had been for years. The broken room had been renovated and a new room built on top of it on the first floor" (32). This depicts how the child acted as a healer for all the miseries that Anjum and others in *Khwabgah* had gone through, it was a way to their happiness as they all might have found their innocent self in the child. Anjum had always longed to have a child of her own. However, deep within she knew that her male body could never bear a child. She embraced motherhood with Zainab in her life and tried to be a good mother in every way. Zainab brought a new ray of hope in Anjum's life. Anjum had always been in need of a sense of belongingness. She had no one to call her own but now she had Zainab who was the world to her. Anjum saw her young self in Zainab, an embodiment of innocence untouched by the corrupt world. She tried to manifest herself in Zainab, to revive the lost innocence. When Zainab was old enough Anjum began to tell her bedtime stories. Those stories were about the miseries she had undergone in her lifetime and were considered to be inappropriate for a child. It was Anjum's "maladroit attempt to make up for the lost time, to transfer herself into Zainab's memory and consciousness, to reveal herself without artifice, so that they could belong to each other completely. As a result she used Zainab as a sort of dock where she unloaded her cargo-her joys and tragedies, her life's cathartic turning points" (32).

The fact that many of Anjum's stories gave nightmares and made Zainab stay awake for hours, fearful and cranky describes the depth of sufferings Anjum had undergone. It also depicts how her dreadful

experiences are too great for anyone to understand. This shows Anjum's desperate need for a person to understand her miseries and complexities. She wanted to be loved and accepted but even Zainab whom she loved dearly failed to understand her. Anjum, in order to make her stories more acceptable in the eyes of Zainab began to put inputs and worked on the "editorial line", "the stories were successfully childproofed, and eventually Zainab even began to look forward to the night-time ritual: (33). This had a positive impact on Anjum because, "In these ways, in order to please Zainab, Anjum began to rewrite a simpler, happier life for herself. The rewriting in turn began to make Anjum a simpler, happier person" (34). This in a way gave her a momentary pleasure of living in a make-believe world where everything was possible. It shows how reality can sometimes be manipulated. However, after Anjum was shattered by the Gujarat riot, Zainab, the only person she loved the most began to turn away from her saying, 'Mummy's never happy'. The unhappy side of Anjum was unacceptable for Zainab but this time Anjum could neither pretend to be happy nor fool herself of editing the nightmares she had undergone. She thus decided to face the reality that had been there right from the beginning.

The longing for love and belongingness had always been there in Anjum as she was deprived of it. When she found Zainab, she finally had someone to love and she wanted to be loved as well. As the world she was born in refused to accept her for who she was and because it deprived her of being loved she wanted Zainab to accept her with all her imperfections. She wanted Zainab to see her from her eyes and not how the outside world saw it. By pouring out her tragedies upon Zainab she was securing herself of the insecurities she had. She was afraid that Zainab will never see her the way she saw herself; that she might consider her the way the world did. In a way she was protecting the only love of her life who had taught her to live once again.

Apart from Zainab, another person who manage to create a place in Anjum's heart was Saddam Hussain, "Anjum knew him a little and

liked him a lot” (72). They were fond of each other and though the relationship they had is unnamed they shared a strong bonding. Saddam loved Anjum the way she was:

*He had grown to love Anjum more than he loved anyone else in the world. He loved the way she spoke, the way she chose, the way she moved her mouth, the way her red paan-stained lips moved over her rotten teeth. He loved her ridiculous front tooth and the way she could recite whole verses of Urdu poetry, most- or all – of which he didn't understand. (84)*

However, in spite of the love that was growing between them, it never progressed and Saddam went on to marry Zainab. This could be seen as a result of Anjum's complex sexuality. The fact that she could never be a conventional wife to Saddam might have also been one of the reasons. Thus, she happily accepted Saddam as her son-in-law at the end. Though Saddam showed much interest on Anjum, the reason why he chose Zainab as his wife is an important aspect to ponder on. Zainab was a complete woman who would have made a 'good wife' and could also bear a child; while Anjum, though she considered herself as a woman was physically a man. The sexual complexity of Anjum might have made Saddam to restrain himself from Anjum. A glimpse of homophobia can also be seen in him as he might have also feared about what the world would say and think about him marrying Anjum who was a hermaphrodite. As Rao says, “the reference to heterosexual love as “normal”, and, by implication, homosexual love as “abnormal”, smacks homophobia” (125).

This is one of the main difference between heterosexual love and homosexual love. The word 'normal' seem to be a controversial term and it is difficult to determine what 'normal' actually means. The word 'normal' is generally understood as something which is acceptable or the thing which majority of the people considers being right. Anything which does not get an approval from the society is either 'queer' or 'abnormal'. The word 'normal' is also a kind of ritual because anything that we are not familiar with or are not used to becomes unacceptable. For example, the homosexual love or

relationship is something that is rarely seen and the heterosexual love and relationship is what majority of the people are used to or familiar with. Thus, homosexual love might seem to be disturbing to the society which has been following the ritual of heterosexual love and marriage.

In the novel, Tilo belonged to a place which Anjum calls *Duniya*, the heterosexual world. However, though they belong to two different worlds their experiences tend to be similar except with the differences in their love life. Tilo, being from *Duniya* and being a complete woman somehow tends to enjoy some freedom when it comes to love. Tilo is a character who dwells in her own world and cares less about the world around her. The readers get to know about Tilo mostly through the eyes of the landlord (Biblap Dasgupta). Her life revolve around three men who were in love with her; Naga, Biplap Dasgupta and Musa. It was in their college days that the four became friends but even after that their lives circled around each other. Tilo and Musa were in love and they even got married but unfortunately their marriage did not work out. After their separation life brought them together again but this time Tilo had to suffer the consequences of loving someone who was considered to be an enemy of the nation.

While in Kashmir, she got caught and was 'punished' under the hands of ACP Pinky who "called down the primordial punishment for the Woman-Who-Must-Be-Taught-A-Lesson" (383). She was not only humiliated for having an affair with an enemy but also her head got shaved. It was a nightmare she could never forget, "Tilo was sitting on a wooden chair with her arms strapped down. Her long hair was on the floor, the scattered curls, no longer hers, mingled with the filth and cigarette butts" (385). Similar to this is the physical abuse that Anjum underwent when she was caught in the Gujarat riot, "she had a haircut. What was left of her now sat on like a helmet with ear muffs" (46). The world had been harsh on both Anjum and Tilo and they both wished to leave their past behind and start a new life. As for Anjum, "She tried to un-know what they



had done to all the others- how they had folded the men and unfolded the women” (61). While Tilo, “wondered how to un-know certain things, certain specific things that she knew but did not wish to know”. (258)

Like Anjum, Tilo was a lonely soul and who according to the landlord “was like a paper boat on a boisterous sea”. He further says that “She was absolutely alone. Even the poor in our country, brutalized as they were, had families. How would she survive? How long would it be before her boat went down?”(160). Tilo never talked about her past and family to anyone because she felt abandoned and unaccepted by her own mother. She was “a girl who didn’t seem to have a past, a family, a community, a people, or even a home” (155). She had never known the love of family as her own mother, Maryam Ipe abandoned her and then adopted her. However, her mother never admitted publicly that she was the real mother of the child. This was because there had been a scandalous affair of Tilo’s mother with a man who belonged to an ‘untouchable’ caste. Because of the fear of Syrian Christians in Kerala she was sent away until the baby was born in a Christian orphanage. She later went back to the orphanage and adapted her own child. The mother had her own reasons for her act. However, the fact that she never acknowledged Tilo as her own daughter had great impact on Tilo and this can be seen in the way their relationship never worked out until the death of Maryam Ipe. As the writer clearly puts it, “for all of her adult life Tilo had defined and shaped herself by marking off and maintaining a distance between herself and her mother- her real foster mother”. (217)

Tilo had undergone her own share of sufferings and this changed her completely. She later marries Naga on being told by Musa because “she couldn’t have done better than becoming the daughter-in-law of Ambassador Shivashankar Hariharahan with a home address in Diplomatic Enclave” (231). This time Tilo married not for love but for protection until the man she loved came back for her, “their marriage had not been what was called ‘consummated’ yet” (391).



Naga and Tilo's marriage contrast the general idea of heterosexual marriage. There was no love between them, nor did they have any physical relationship. She held this life together for fourteen years but she grew tired of living a life that wasn't really hers. She was exhausted by herself. However, all those years Naga had been hoping that one day the woman he had married would forget her past and begin to love him. He didn't want to lose her but he knew that she would leave one day. The helpless man who had waited all these years for her did hit her one day, "Then he held her and wept. 'Don't go. Please don't go'" (233). Little did he know that the woman he was crying for was tired of her own life and thought of herself as incapable of loving. Both Anjum and Tilo seem to be connected to each other in one way or the other. When Anjum met Tilo for the first time in the Jannat Guest House she, "spoke as though it was a world that Tilo was familiar with" (305). It was as if their souls had known each other from before, and it was in Jannat Guest House that for the first time Tilo found a sense of belongingness. Her, "Instinct told her that she may finally have found a home for the Rest of Her Life" (305).

In the midst of all the wretchedness, the arrival of the infant Miss Jebeen the second "was the beginning of something" (215). Miss Jebeen the first was a child who had died as a result of the hatred of the humanity towards one another. She was Musa's daughter who became a victim to the Indo-Pakistan war and was the movement's youngest martyrs. She died along with her mother by the same bullet, "It entered Miss Jebeen's head through her left temple and came to rest in her mother's heart" (310). The infant in the novel plays a significant role. She is the embodiment of love, peace and humility. The coming of Miss Jebeen the second was as if she had been born again to fulfill the task that had been left undone. She brought with her love and hope for the people who considered themselves unworthy and 'incapable' of being loved. Arundhati Roy has brought in Biblical concepts in reference to the child. The chapter itself is titled as 'The Nativity' which can be referred to the birth of Jesus Christ. However, unlike Christ she was an abandoned

baby who lay naked under a column of swarming neon-lit mosquitoes, “She appeared quite suddenly, a little after midnight. No angels sang, no wise men brought gifts. But a million stars rose in the east to herald her arrival. One moment she wasn't there, and the next-she was on the concrete pavement, in a crib of litter”. (96)

The child was a result of immense torment and abuse, and was a product of hatred. Her mother had almost made up her mind to kill her when she was born but love had survived her all these time. Comrade Maase Revathy was a communist and she was the real mother of Miss Jebeen the Second. She was sexually abused and raped by six policeman and as a result gave birth to Udaya (Miss Jebeen). She had sent a letter to Dr. Azad Bharathiya revealing herself and the identity of the baby before she killed herself. Comrade Maase is not just a fictional character as Arundhati Roy has mentioned her in her book, *Walking With the Comrades*. The details about her given in the novel seems to be similar with what Roy says in her book. Through this portrayal Roy tries to retell the story of those women comrades who constantly falls a prey to sexual abuse and torment under the hands of their enemies. On reading about the afflictions of Comrade Maase Revathy, “Each of the listeners recognized, in their own separate ways, something of themselves and their own stories, their own Indo-Pak, in the story of this unknown, faraway woman who was no longer alive” (426). The narrator also narrates that unlike her biological mother, Miss Jebeen would grow up “protected and loved”, and this also makes Roy's idea vivid that love is a universal language.

When the abandoned child was found on the pavement Tilo took her and she was surprised as to how she was strangely attached to the baby because she was someone who was never fond of babies. The child also acts as a mode of connection between Tilo and Anjum because it was for the security of the child that Tilo decided to take shelter in the Jannat Guest House. Like Christ who came to this world to save men from their sins, Miss Jebeen the second had also come to save the world from all wretchedness once again as in

the novel it says, "But even he knew that things would turn out all right in the end. They would, because they had too. Because Miss Jebeen, Miss Udaya Jebeen, was come" (438). These are the final lines of the novel and with this it brings a new hope upon the loveless world. The child is a symbol of love that has come to revive all that has been lost in the brutal war of humanity who has forgotten to live in harmony with each other. Her arrival depicts how she had come to teach the greatest lesson of love to humanity, that love is not limited to all the socially constructed barriers of mankind. By ending the novel in a positive note, Arundhati Roys has an optimistic outlook towards a better world where there would be no discrimination in regard to caste, creed, religion, sexual identities, a world in which individuality will be given more importance than all the social differences. By bringing in the theme of love in the novel she has also depicted how the nature of love is same both in the homosexual and heterosexual worlds. The novel portrays how love comes in all forms and does not distinguish between individuals basing on their social, political or sexual identities. Thus we understand how the ultimate source of achieving utmost happiness is 'love' as it has greatest ability of bringing 'acceptance' and acknowledging even the socially outcaste people and giving them equal opportunities.

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