Americans pay little attention to Kashmir except when India and Pakistan move to the brink of war that could go nuclear. Even members of Congress and foreign policy experts know little about the frequently violent struggles that have killed approximately 50,000 people in the Kashmir Valley since 1989. Many of us who work on South Asian security tend to see Kashmir as an “issue”—something that might trigger nuclear war, that stands in the way of normalizing relations between India and Pakistan, and that the Army in Pakistan uses to justify its domestic predominance—rather than as a humanitarian crisis that must be redressed through politics.

This inattention may be increasingly dangerous. In the past few years, Kashmiri Muslim agitation against the central Indian government has grown in scale and intensity and taken on new characteristics. Protests occur more frequently and spontaneously, and draw larger crowds than before. The protestors are younger and more educated than in decades past. They are more avowedly Islamist in their expressions.

Meanwhile, the Indian government deploys roughly 600,000 security personnel—Army, central and state police, intelligence, etc.—to impose order and root out the most militant actors. Indian and Pakistani militaries exchange artillery and other fire nearly every day across the Line of Control that divides the parts of Kashmir that Pakistan and India each controls. Each side has episodically and reciprocally captured and beheaded soldiers from the other side of the line. Militants—or “terrorists”—cross frequently from the Pakistani side into the Indian side.
abetted by the Pakistani Army and intelligence services. Sometimes they kill Indian soldiers in spectacular fashion. India strikes back one way or another.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who has led the central government since 2014, projects himself as a “strong man” and evinces no interest in negotiating with leaders of the Kashmiri intifada. His party’s Hindu-chauvinist base has become increasingly violent and repressive toward Muslims. The Kashmiri resistance does not appear to be structured to allow for leaders to articulate practical demands and implement any negotiated agreement.

Against this harsh political backdrop, Arundhati Roy’s new novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, succeeds in humanizing the difficult predicaments faced by Kashmiri Muslims in poignant, often wry ways. Since the global success of her 1997 novel, *The God of Small Things*, Roy has been a humanitarian activist primarily in India. Through deed, speech, and artful, if not always persuasive, political prose, Roy has defended underdogs of all castes, creeds, and genders. She has faced arrest, legal prosecution, and all manner of threats for it.

II

One worries that political novels will be one-sided and strident. Not this one. It’s clear that Roy loves the street-level souls she narrates through New Delhi and Kashmir, but the politics are nuanced and left unresolved. Notwithstanding a few didactic moments, the book is a vital antidote to the political abstraction that usually veils Kashmir. Literary critics may complain that her characters are under-drawn, but compared to academic and journalistic coverage of the struggles around Kashmir the novel is deeply insightful.

It starts with Hijras—transwomen—in old Delhi. We meet the first character, who was named Aftab originally, then Anjum after her medical transition. Through sometimes hilarious scenes, we follow as Anjum and her fellow “battered angels” form a small heterodox colony in a graveyard near a mortuary. They call it the Janatt [Paradise] Guest House and Funeral Services. “The advantage of the guest house in the graveyard was that unlike every other neighborhood in the city, including the most exclusive ones, it suffered no power cuts. Not even in the summer. This was because Anjum stole her electricity from the mortuary, where the corpses required round-the-clock refrigeration. (The city’s paupers who lay there in air-conditioned splendor had never experienced anything of the kind while they were alive.)” [72]

One of the Hijras, Nimmo, explains why God made Hijras. “It was an experiment. He decided to create something, a living creature that is incapable of happiness. So he made us.” Nimmo’s interlocutor protests: “You are all happy here!” Nimmo retorts that for normal people unhappiness comes from external sources: “Price-rise, children’s school-admissions…Hindu-Muslim riots, Indo-Pak war—outside things that settle down eventually.” But, for Hijras “the riot is inside us. The war is inside
us. Indo-Pak is inside us. It will never settle down. It can’t.”

*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*’s characters thus move through the periphery of several recent eruptions in Indian politics, including the 2002 slaughter and rape of more than 1,000 Muslims in Narendra Modi’s Gujarat. During a mass demonstration in New Delhi against corruption, resembling those led by Anna Hazare in 2011-12, the band of Hijra friends find themselves amidst a panoply of diverse protestors:

Fiercely competitive TV channels covered the story of the breaking city as ‘Breaking News.’ Nobody pointed out the irony. They unleashed their untrained, but excellent-looking, young reporters, who spread across the city like a rash, asking urgent, empty questions; they asked the poor what it was like to be poor, the hungry what it was like to be hungry, the homeless what it was like to be homeless. [103]

It is during this demonstration that Roy links the two halves of her novel. A newborn girl has been abandoned on the sidewalk, a note tied to her wrist saying that the mother could not take care of her. A crowd gathers. Anjum moves to take the baby, saying she would give it a loving home. Others, recoiling at the idea of a transwoman taking the child, intervene. In the hubbub, someone else secretes the baby away.

That someone, we come to know, is Tilo. She is the central character of the rest of the book. Through flashbacks told from the perspective of several characters, we learn that Tilo is the hub of a group of four college-age friends who met in the early 1980s around a theater group. The other three are men. Each of them in one way or another loves Tilo—a woman who “lived in the country of her own skin. A country that issued no visas and seemed to have no consulates.” Biplab Dasgupta and Nagaraj Hariharan, for their part, are well-born Brahmins—sons of a heart surgeon and a senior diplomat, respectively. Musa is a Kashmir Muslim, quiet and, like Tilo, an artist. In a jumbled chronology, we see how their paths intersect in Kashmir and New Delhi over the succeeding thirty years.

III

Tilo and Musa were romantically involved as students and then went their separate ways. They meet again briefly in 1995 when Tilo visits Kashmir. Shortly thereafter, Musa, now in his mid-30s, is brought in for questioning by Major Amrik Singh. Musa’s wife and three-year old daughter have just been killed by security forces’ random gunfire to break up a massive funeral procession. Singh is widely known as an uncanny tracker of terrorists. He suspects that Musa’s outward calm betrays a new vengefulness to fight Indian occupation. Musa stoically evades Singh’s probes and is allowed to leave the Joint Interrogation Center, which occupies the building that used to be the Shiraz Cinema.

As Musa walks out through the lobby, he notices advertisement posters for
Candy and popcorn still mounted on the wall. Other suspected militants sit waiting their turns to be questioned. Peons who work for the government are sweeping or carrying tea on trays for officers; Musa recognizes several who are informers for the militants. Before Musa exits, however, Singh calls out, descending the staircase and holding something in his hand. He says he forgot to give Musa a gift to deliver to his (Musa’s) father, a businessman who collaborates with the central government. It’s a bottle of Red Stag whiskey.

The lobby fell silent. Everybody, the audience as well as the protagonists of the play that was unfolding, understood the script. If Musa spurned the gift, it would be a public declaration of war with Amrik Singh—which made him, Musa, as good as dead. If he accepted it, Amrik Singh would have outsourced the death sentence to the militants. Because he knew that the news would get out, and that every militant group, whatever else they disagreed about, agreed that death was the punishment for collaborators and friends of the Occupation. And whiskey-drinking—even by non-collaborators—was a declared un-Islamic activity. [348]

Musa goes home, put his affairs in order, then sneaks out into a life underground. Through twists and turns of activity, the four old friends are reunited—not physically, but proximately, as the security forces chase Musa, and Tilo is detained in a raid on a houseboat where he had been hiding. Tilo seeks Dasgupta’s help, as he is now a senior official in the Intelligence Bureau in Jammu and Kashmir, but he is traveling. So he asks Nagaraj, who is now a newspaper correspondent in Srinagar, to go and retrieve Tilo.

When Naga arrives at the Interrogation Center, he is brought into a room where Tilo sits in silence. He puts his arm around her shoulder; she remains still. The deputy commandant, Ashfaq Mir, enters full of officious energy. The two men have a short chat over tea and biscuits as if Tilo were not there. Mir knows Naga’s reputation as a prominent journalist with human rights sensitivities, and he asks rhetorically:

And after Azadi [freedom]? Has anyone thought? What will majority do to the minority? Kashmiri Pandits have already gone. Only us Muslims remain. What will we do to each other? What will Salafis do to Barelvis? What will Sunnis do to Shias? They say they will go to Jannat [paradise] more surely if they kill a Shia than if they kill a Hindu. What will be the fate of Ladakhi Buddhists? Jammu Hindus J&K is not just Kashmir. It’s Jammu and Kashmir, and Ladakh. Has any Separatist thought of this? The answer, I can tell you, is a big ‘No’. [226]

Naga agrees with Mir. Yet at the same time he recognizes “how carefully this seed of self-doubt had been sown by an administration that had clawed its way back into control from the brink of utter chaos.” Naga knows well of what he
speaks: he’s secretly on the payroll of the Intelligence Bureau, as a voice of reasonable and occasional criticism of governmental excesses that validates India’s democratic brand to itself and to the world.

IV

Throughout the book’s treatment of Kashmir, as in this passage, there is much honesty and no political answer. Roy describes a funeral procession wending through Srinagar in a way that exemplifies the book’s beautiful lament:

Seventeen-plus-one tin coffins wove through the streets, winking back at the winter sun. To someone looking down at the city from the ring of high mountains that surrounded it, the procession would have looked like a column of brown ants carrying seventeen-plus-one sugar crystals to their anthill to feed their queen. Perhaps to a student of history and human conflict, in relative terms that’s all the little procession really amounted to: a column of ants making off with some crumbs that had fallen from the high table. [332]

*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* does not offer political hope. But there is solace. The battered angels in the cemetery guest house love each other and the children they raise together. Roy (like Anthony Doerr in his masterpiece World War II novel, *All the Light We Cannot See*, has infused a grim history of warfare and political repression with rays of familial love and individual kindness.

Elsewhere, Roy has said, “India needs azadi from Kashmir as much as Kashmir needs azadi from India.” The same could be said for Pakistan, too; it needs azadi from Kashmir. All of the sides in this conflicted relationship are ruined by it. Too much damage has been done for the various parties to imagine living decently under one or the other government.

Indian and Pakistani negotiators who worked secretly from 2004-2007 sketched a possible resolution that would remove Indian and Pakistani military forces, open the “border” between the two halves so Kashmiris could move and trade freely, and create a joint Pakistani-Indian-Kashmiri mechanism for self-governance. The idea was to make the border irrelevant, without requiring either country to surrender sovereignty or territory they now control. But then-President Pervez Musharraf’s standing collapsed in Pakistan, terrorists backed by Pakistani intelligence conducted the horrific November 2008 attack on Mumbai, and, unsurprisingly, negotiations of all kinds ended.

Ten years later, however, Kashmir is still more violently agitated. The Indian government is yet more belligerent and demanding. The Pakistani military is even less inclined than before to bend and thereby reward Hindu aggressiveness. For its part, the U.S. increasingly sees India as a strategic partner—like Israel—and defers to its preferences whether they are “right” or “wrong.” One of the Indian
government's strongest preferences is that the U.S. and others not treat Kashmir as a crisis that requires multifaceted political accommodation by all sides. Lost in all this abstraction, however, is what India and Pakistan are doing to Kashmir and Kashmiris, and what, in turn, that is doing to India and Pakistan. The war, it seems, is inside them.

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