

Questioning the Subaltern: A Critical Analysis of Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* and *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract

*The paper critically examines the interconnected themes of subalternity, identity, and resistance in Arundhati Roy's famous novels, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* and *The God of Small Things*. Analysing subalternity through the theoretical lenses of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Simone de Beauvoir, the study investigates how the novelist represents the marginalized communities who have been rendered voiceless by the institutional powers of hegemony, caste, gender, religion, and politics. The research further explores how the central characters of the novels under study challenge the conventional representations of the subaltern by adopting multiple and overlapping identities. Finally, the paper attempts to showcase how Roy advances her transformative vision of love, kindness, compassion, and solidarity as forces of resistance in a world divided by caste, religion, gender, political opinions, etc.*

Keywords

Subaltern, Transgender, Identity, Marginalized sections, Resistance

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According to “Article 1” of the United Nation’s *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights”. However, UN’s promise stands in stark contrast to the historical realities faced by marginalized people of the world whose rights, freedom, equality, and dignity have been severely compromised for ages. They have been facing subjugation and systemic biases based on gender, caste, religion, and wealth in the patriarchal, caste-ridden, materialistic world for centuries. Consequently, these disadvantaged sections of society have continually struggled to assert themselves, voice their opinions, and make decisions about their lives. In this context, Simone de Beauvoir’s observation about women — that they have “gained only what men have been willing to grant; they have taken nothing, they have only received” (8) may be extended to all the subaltern groups of society subjected to societal discrimination and exclusion. Such communities have been rendered voiceless, powerless, and even purposeless by their exploiters. Reconciling the divide between the powerful and the powerless, the voiced and the voiceless, the exploiter and the exploited is one of the biggest hurdles of modern times. People have made numerous attempts to find solutions to these problems. Social activists and writers from around the world have sought to empower marginalized sections of society by empathizing with them and sharing their stories with the world. In India, writers like Mulk Raj Anand, Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapur, Amrita Pritam, Githa Hariharan, Arundhati Roy, Bama, Omprakash Valmiki, and many more have beautifully showcased in their works the complex realities of subaltern lives, highlighting their aspirations, sufferings, struggles, suppression, marginalisation, quest for identity, dignity, and social equality. In this selection, Arundhati Roy distinguishes herself by weaving together a realistic portrayal of the condition and sufferings of transgender hijra community while also delineating the issues of caste oppression, religious marginalization, and political violence in her famous novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017). Her work can be fruitfully compared with her own masterpiece, *The God of Small Things* (1997), which delineates the quest of subaltern identities within the framework of Indian society and postcolonial experience.

The term “subaltern” was first introduced by Antonio Gramsci, who used it to describe cultural hegemony and to identify such groups which were marginalized, suppressed, displaced, and excluded from all systems of dominance. The term was further popularized by critics such as Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who argue that it refers to marginalized groups of people who remain socially, politically, religiously, and culturally excluded from dominant structures of knowledge and power. This concept becomes highly relevant in the context of

Arundhati Roy's novels, *The God of Small Things* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. In both of her novels, the writer attempts to give voice and visibility to those who have been rendered voiceless and invisible in the socio-political history of India. These books are seminal works that highlight posthuman and subaltern issues through their characters and their life experiences.

In her 2017 novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Roy beautifully describes the subaltern voices of historically silenced transgender characters, mainly represented by the protagonist, Anjum, who is a Hijra and a Muslim. Through this character, the writer reconstructs the discourse of the "subaltern" by presenting a hybrid identity that exists outside the traditional norms of gender, religion, and dominant political ideology. It is through the character of a transgender that the novelist questions the gender issue prevalent in society, which blinds its eyes towards transgender individuals and considers them non-entities. Her sensitive portrayal of Anjum's mother, Jahanara Begum's shock and disbelief on seeing her newborn baby's male and female genital parts is described in the reaction of Jahanara Begum: "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" (Roy, *Ministry* 8). Since childhood, Anjum was a victim of alienation in a heteronormative society wherein she was forced to conform to the binary categories of "male" or "female". She was not allowed to be who she was or wanted to be. She was a victim of whims and notions of heterosexuality that opposed and oppressed any non-binary identities. In her childhood, she was given a male name, Aftab, despite her hermaphrodite status. When she was sent to Ustaad Hameed Khan to learn Hindustani classical music, other children teased her: "He's a She. He's not a He or a She. He's a He and a She. She-He, He-She Hee! Hee! Hee!" (Roy, *Ministry* 12). After this incident, Aftab stopped attending the class. Another major incident that becomes a turning point in Anjum's life is the Gujarat Riots. During these riots, she finds herself doubly marginalized for being a Muslim and also a transgender. During these troubled times, she comes face-to-face with the hard social reality of how the powerless, suppressed, and marginalized classes of people become soft targets of some political agenda. Through this incident, Arundhati Roy expands the idea of subalternity beyond caste, class, religion, or gender. The novelist writes that Aftab was "a rare example of a human being who had no place in the world of men or women" (Roy, *Ministry* 40). This statement strongly presents the difficult position of transgender individuals

searching for their rightful place in a society divided by numerous factors like gender, religion, caste, class, race, wealth, etc. Such incidents in the life of transgenders like Anjum increase their desire to adopt a single gender identity i.e., either male or female, through sex reassignment surgery.

When Anjum takes her decision to undergo a surgery to become a woman, she joins the community of Hijras, “the Khwabgah,” or “the House of Dreams”. Although she joins the community while anticipating it to be an ideal place for people like her, she is disillusioned to see the pathetic condition of Hijras whom the patriarchal society ignores badly. She is surprised to know that there is a hierarchical system in the Khwabgah. Saeeda “was in close competition with Anjum to take over as Ustad of the Khwabgah when Ustad Kulsoom Bi decided to relinquish charge” (Roy, *Ministry* 38-9). Later, when Anjum can no longer tolerate the biased attitude of people, she decides to leave the subliminal life being lived at “the House of Dreams.” Thereafter, she sets up the Jannat Guest House, or Paradise, in a graveyard, which ultimately becomes a ‘safe haven’ for herself and others like her. It is “a hub for Hijras who, for one reason or another, had fallen out of, or been expelled from, the tightly administered grid of Hijra Gharanas” (Roy, *Ministry* 68). Unlike Khwabgah, there is no hierarchical system. Here, everyone is equal, and no one is exploited, marginalized, or mocked. All the residents are connected to one-another in this place. This act of making new connections is Anjum’s way of ending all forms of alienation and thus having a distinct identity of her own. In this perspective, graveyard becomes a symbol of paradise that serves as a refuge for social outcasts like hijras, abandoned children and political rebels.

Regarding the queer issue presented in the book, a critic, Parul Sehgal calls the novel a fable and states that it is “as much for them (queers) as about them; it commemorates their struggles and their triumphs...” (2017). Numerous scholars agree with this view. In “A Supermarket of Grief: Roy’s Second Novel Illuminates Humankind’s Paradoxical Capacities for Cruelty and Kindness,” Seaman sees Anjum as “the unifying force in this tale of suffering, sacrifice, and transcendence” (7). In this view, Anjum is a transgender protagonist who creates connections among differences.

Here, the novelist’s portrayal of life, struggles, quest for identity, emotional vulnerabilities, and survival mechanisms of hijra community is commendable. She stays away from stereotypical representations of transgender community in her work. She does not portray them as somebody to be stigmatized, ridiculed, marginalized, or as objects of social exclusion. She humanizes them by presenting Anjum as a deeply compassionate, intelligent, and resilient individual. Through Anjum’s character, the novelist challenges the stereotypical binaries of masculinity and femininity, inclusion

and exclusion, and centre and margin. By doing so, she exposes the hypocrisy and artificiality of patriarchal ideology upholding the rigid gender norms.

Thus, the novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* presents transgender people's search for identity and their efforts to get liberation from the strictest gender norms of society and any oppression thereof. The creation of a safe place, called 'Paradise' is their own way of resisting being considered inferior, marginalized, silenced, and historically muted beings. The novel shows a hopeful view of transgender people's quest for identity and their liberation. In this way, the novelist's contribution in lending voice to marginalized, silenced, non-binary subaltern entities is immense.

Such a bold and unconventional treatment of non-binary subaltern identities can also be witnessed in her earlier work, *The God of Small Things* (1997). This novel is a masterpiece in her bold treatment of marginalized individuals. The novelist does not treat her characters merely as victims, but presents them as complex, emotional, and psychologically mature individuals trying to find solutions to various social problems. That's why both of her novels, i.e. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* and *The God of Small Things* can fruitfully be compared on the basis of her treatment of subaltern identity. There are several similarities and a few differences in her depiction of marginalized characters in these novels. While *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* showcases the story of a transgender individual, Anjum, *The God of Small Things* presents the struggles of Velutha, a Dalit by caste. Both of them have to suffer a lot for crossing social boundaries. Velutha's relationship with an upper caste Syrian Christian girl, Ammu is a clear violation of the social norms of a patriarchal society. This relationship between a poor untouchable Dalit and a divorced Christian woman blatantly violates the established caste-boundaries and the deep-seated prejudices of the community. Both of them are socially marginalized individuals trying to find their centre in an orthodox caste-ridden patriarchal society. Velutha, despite his poverty and lower caste status, dares to love Ammu, an upper-caste woman who is a divorcee too. Their relationship clearly violates the rigid, unwritten, but deeply entrenched "Love Laws" of Ayemenem community that preach "who should be loved. And how. And how much" (Roy, *God* 31). In such a society, the connection between Velutha and Ammu is bound to have catastrophic consequences. Here, the observation by Biswal and Pattnaik seems apt: "Because their relationship simultaneously threatens several axes of authority, it is not only scandalous but also subversive" (q386). This is exactly the reason that the novelist also proclaims about them: "They had nothing, no future" (Roy, *God* 177). She further writes, "They all broke the rules. They all crossed into forbidden territory" (Roy, *God* 31). The line highlights how oppressive societies punish those who

challenge established hierarchies. This punishment is nothing less than death. Velutha, despite being an emotional, caring, devout, talented, and intelligent person, becomes a victim of oppressive social forces, gets brutally beaten by the police, and ultimately succumbs to his injuries. In such a caste-ridden society, his death is a tragic inevitability. Thus, the main characters in both novels, i.e., Velutha and Anjum, have to suffer at the hands of the orthodox society. Their lives are almost similar since they became victims of institutional violence.

However, there are a few differences in their characters also. In *The God of Small Things*, Velutha dares to challenge the orthodox rules of the state and society, and as a result, has to face the consequences. His death symbolizes that subaltern individuals must conform to the rigid rules of the ruthless society to survive within oppressive systems. In contrast, Anjum survives and becomes a beacon of light for marginalized individuals like her. This difference indicates Roy's movement from tragedy toward resistance and hope. While *The God of Small Things* is a saga of tragedy and loss, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* ends on a vision of positive possibilities, resistance, and hope. Critic Meenakshi Mukherjee once said that Mulk Raj Anand's fiction "humanized the oppressed classes in Indian English literature." This observation can aptly be applied to Roy's representation of subaltern people in Indian society. She not only highlights the plight of the marginalized but also proposes a corrective vision for society, suggesting that humanity survives not through violence and rigidity but through love, care, tolerance, and empathy towards other living beings. While *The God of Small Things* presents the harsh treatment of subaltern individuals by a stratified patriarchal society encompassing multiple identity-based hierarchies, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* highlights her positive vision, that in a world full of violence and exclusion, 'Utmost happiness' can be achieved through acts of love, kindness, compassion, and solidarity irrespective of divisional factors like caste, religion, gender, political opinions, etc.

Thus, both novels by Arundhati Roy are landmark contributions to Indian English fiction, as they explore transgender and subaltern identities. In this way, she not only challenges social prejudices but also expands the scope of subaltern discourse.

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