



The new subaltern in arundhati roy's "*The ministry of utmost happiness*": Gendered spaces captured

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Abstract

Arundhati Roy is an internationally acclaimed Indian female writer in contemporary times. After winning the Booker prize in 1997 for her debut novel "*The God of Small Things*", she got her renowned fame, and almost after 20 years she published "*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*". Where she tried to depict all the castaways of the subcontinents under one roof. The novel is endured by hijras, political rebels, the poor, women who don't know their place, and abandoned baby girls; it seems to articulate a post-Colonial nation's history from the perspective of the marginalized. Anjum, a hijra, Saddam Hussain, a Dalit, Mulaqat Ali, a doctor of herbal medicine, and Tilottama, a maverick young woman, are among the main characters in the extensive narrative skills whose tales intertwine within the text. The storyline of the novel explores everybody and everything happening in the rapidly changing India, on the other way emphasis on gender issues, gender discrimination, caste equality, capitalization, and many things of socio-political issues considered.

Thus, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is spontaneous and undoubtedly a paroxysm of the author's observation of the 'New Subaltern' who are victims of social and political injustice. Hence, this paper aims to rejuvenate Roy's depiction of the 'New Subaltern' in the present-day democratic Indian scenario through the post-colonial context.

Keywords: the new subaltern, transgender, heterotopia, oppression, marginalization, dalit

Introduction

Arundhati Roy, in her second novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, delicately intertwined the lives of trans-woman Anjum, protagonist, born as Aftab in the house of Jahanara Begum and Mulaqat Ali, with the narrative of Kashmir backdrop, Indian politics, and rebellions spirit of S. Tilottama, many were left wondering about the congruency of the narrative. The central character of the novel, Anjum, a hijra, and family history begins with the partition and its impact on Muslims in Delhi, and primarily historical facts focus on the post-emergency in India. Novel deals with Dalit lynching, the pogrom against Sikhs in 1984, the rise of Hindu fundamentalist, communal roots of Gujarat, the ramification of army occupation in Kashmir, and resistance movement against the government. Through these lines, she heavily subjugated the societal discrimination as the representative of the subaltern.

Introducing *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

Roy in her novel tells the story of different people from various parts of the country, from Kashmir to Kerala, that too expand from northern to southern parts. Once in an interview, Roy said, "I'll have to find a language to tell the story I want to tell, By language I don't mean English, Hindi, Urdu, Malayalam, of course. I mean something else. A way of binding together worlds that have been ripped apart."

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness takes us on an inmost journey of many years across the Indian subcontinent - from the constricted neighborhoods of Delhi and Old Delhi and the roads of the new city to the mountains and valleys of Kashmir and beyond, where war is peace and peace is war. This is an aching story and a decisive remonstrance, a story

told in a whisper, in a shout, through unsentimental tears and sometimes with a bitter laugh. Each of its characters is ineffable and tenderly rendered in all aspects. Its heroes are people who have been broken by the world they live in and then rescued, patched together by acts of love - and by hope, where Roy's writing becomes a magnum opus.

The narrative begins with Anjum, who used to be Aftab, is attacked in the Gujarat riots of 2002, after being traumatized, insecure, and distrustful of people, she leaves khwabgah and begins living in a city graveyard. We encounter the odd, unforgettable Tilo and the men who loved her - including Musa, sweetheart and ex-sweetheart, lover and ex-lover; their fates are as entwined as their arms used to be and always will be. Tilo's story is told in the third person. Tilo is dark-skinned and intelligent, she is close with an architecture student from Kashmir, named Musa Yeswi, who later, was involved with the Kashmiri separatist movement. And then two of the men who loved her during their college days, an old bureaucrat nicknamed 'Garson Hobart' and a mainstream journalist named Naga who becomes her husband. After much more turmoil, finally, Musa joins Tilo at Jannat Guest House for a night. Tilo eventually hears word that Musa has died in the fight for Kashmiri freedom. In the last scene, Anjum takes Miss Udaya Jebeen for a walk around Delhi while a small dung beetle watches over the world. And all the inhabitants of the graveyard guest house find happiness after being evicted from the world.

As this ravishing, deeply humane novel braids these lives together, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* demonstrates on every page the miracle of Arundhati Roy's storytelling gifts, where one can find about socio-political issues, gendered issues, marginalization, oppression in every corner of the text.

Heterotopias and gendered spaces in Roy's novel

'Heterotopia', is a concept by philosopher Michel Foucault, where he describes discursive spaces that are somehow 'other'. Roy, in her novel, enacted this concept of heterotopias to elaborate upon the subversive articulation of her protagonist. In the novel, several heterotopic spaces are used. The graveyard which is Anjum's home is an instance of heterotopic spaces, and residing over and leaving her lodging for Kawabagh, is another heterotopic space like the graveyard. Anjum is enforced to unearth heterotopia that defies the rules and value structure of the regular, surveyed city spaces. "In that setting, Anjum would ordinarily have been in some danger. But her desolation protected her. Unleashed at last from social protocol, it rose up around her in all its majesty-a fort, with ramparts, turrets, hidden dungeons and walls that hummed like an approaching mob." (Roy, 61p) The particular graveyard has a few drug addicts and homeless people occupying some sections of it, nevertheless, Anjum felt safe there. So, to her, this graveyard now becomes a place of desolation to a 'home', which is also reliable to her otherwise. Anjum's "Jannat Guest House became 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, 68p) This is the place, whereas a heterotopia, houses the Others such as Dayanand, and Saddam Hussein, a Dalit. On the other side, Shiraz Cinema is another space discussed in the novel as a heterotopic space. This is a location in Kashmir, now it has been converted into an interrogation place for Army and police, previously it was for screening cinema. Throughout the text, Roy expressed heterotopic spaces along with her character traveling in gender, class, and caste consciousness. These are mostly visible in the characterization of the protagonist. The storyline leads through the streets of Delhi, Kashmir, and other few spaces which are unique in nature. Tilo, who resides at an apartment that belongs to Das, being a woman, it's been difficult for living, which contrasts with the Anjum's spaces. Tilo's subaltern arises from her intimate association with Musa, a terrorist, and her active role in the friction of everyday life.

Likewise, Tilo, Anjum was born as Aftab. For her mother "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, 8p) Anjum's experience is more traumatic and conflict-stricken. From her mother's eye, growing up would be challenging for the outer world. But, Aftab's father is confronted with this gender fluidity, later, Mulaqat Ali decides to intervene, and decides to identify the boy in Aftab. Dr. Nabi precisely expresses, "Aftab, he said, was a rare example of a Hermaphrodite, with both male and female characteristics, though outwardly, the male characteristics appeared to be more dominant" (Roy, 16-17p). Soon, Aftab realized the Other spaces and identity issues and eagerly sought alternative spaces where he could accommodate with "One spring morning Aftab saw a tall, slim-hipped woman wearing bright lipstick, gold high heels and a shiny, green satin salwar kameez..." (Roy, 18p). Khwabagh - the house of Dream - Aftab's destination for living and his inclusive feeling of acceptance prevailing there. The place is typically a representation of the othering that marginalizes the Other gender. Thus, "at the age of fifteen, only a few hundred yards from where his family had

lived for centuries, Aftab stepped through an ordinary doorway into another universe" (Roy, 25p).

"Subaltern studies" group

Subaltern, the term, refers to an officer holding a military rank just below that of captain in the British army. This term was coined and was first introduced by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci in his article "Notes on Italian History". It shows the earliest political historiography shifted the voice of the subaltern groups (women, tribal people, Third world). According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, to marginalize is an act "to make somebody feel as if they are not important and cannot influence decisions or events; to put somebody in a position in which they have no power". Preoccupied with Gramsci's idea of the subaltern, other 20th century scholars who were working with Indian peasantry historiography extended the definition of the subaltern. This group was led by Ranjit Guha and other South Asian historians, social critics, and scholars like Touraj Atabaki, Shahid Amin, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Partha Chatterjee, Gyan Pandey, and Sumit Sarkar. The Indian American postcolonial theorist and translator Gayatri Spivak reinterpreted the concept of the subaltern. She is known for her best-known essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In this essay, she exposes the irony that the subalterns have awakened to a consciousness of their own rights by making practical utterances against unjust domination and inequality. Here Spivak critiques the essentialist underpinnings of Subaltern Studies, where the marginalized subaltern subject is always defined via his or her difference from the elites.

Sketching of anjum (A hijra) as a representative of subaltern

The leading character of the novel is a Hijra (eunuch) and in terms of rights, they are the most marginalized people in society particularly in the Indian context. Spivak in her work "The Rani of Sirmur " canvassed how colonialism and patriarchy combine to erase women as subaltern. In terms of transgender, it can be said that social-political deprivation, patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism, and even their own body altogether combine to erase them as subaltern. Nimmo, a transgender living at khwabgah, in conversation with Anjum, "D'you know why god made Hijra? [...] It was an experiment [...] He decided to create something, a living creature that is incapable of happiness [...] How can you say that? You are all happy here! This is the Khwabgah! [...] for us the price rise and school admissions, husband's beatings, wives' cheatings, Hindu-Muslim riots, Indo-Pak war [...] all inside us. The riot is inside us. [...] The war is inside us. Indo-Pak is inside us. It will never settle down (Roy, 23p)." Treatment of transgender could be viewed in terms of their marginalized and sub-ordinate position. At this position, a point could be raised that the transgender people as subaltern, in accordance with Spivak, have no history but they are always there in the society. Once Gudiya told Kulsoom Bi that she "tried to tell her that Hijras had a special place of love and respect in Hindu mythology", everybody reached Ayodhya from the forest disobeying Ram's utterance, 'Only Hijras waited faithfully for him (Ram) at the edge of the forest for the whole fourteen years' (Roy, 51p). Transgenders are the part and parcel of Indian Society but their existence is neglected by throwing them out of the focus. Treatment of the third

gender in society is really cruel and brutal and occurs in public spaces, police stations, prisons, and their homes. They face extreme discrimination. As their life is unproductive, their dance and songs too are unproductive. From the literature point of view, characterization in the literary field is almost absent. In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Anjum, as the protagonist, vividly portrays the character and the struggle. Sehgal (2017) ^[2] argued, “Anjum, for example, never becomes more than her patched-together body and she partially realized dreams.” Anjum views her thoughts to Saddam that “Once you have fallen off the edge like all of us have, including our Biroo,” Anjum said, ‘you will never stop falling. And as you fall you will hold on to other falling people. The sooner you understand that the better. This place where we live, where we have made our home, is the place of falling people. Here there is no haqeeqat. Arre, even we aren’t real. We don’t really exist.’ (Roy, 84p)

Anjum has brought all other marginalized people in one place, a graveyard, and possibly it becomes the representative of the subaltern class. Jannat Guest House is probably the most important setting of the novel. This graveyard has its importance at the behest of Anjum’s living spaces, it’s been his protection from the heavy outer world. On the other side, Jannat House has its own stature in the contribution of the novel, where, as subaltern Anjum and other marginalized people gather to liberate their freedom of expression and the new identity. Roy has shown hijras as Subalterns and their activity and importance quite differently. Spivak has discussed that “because her attempt at “speaking” outside normal patriarchal channels was not understood or supported, she concluded that “the subaltern cannot speak.” (Michael Kilburn, Spring, edited: 2017). Roy, here, becomes the mouthpiece of gendered marginalized people that may be defined as a new subaltern, where they got some open-air or open space and open voices that are being heard with this novel.

Representing caste and women as subaltern

Caste inequality and caste discrimination is a significant social problem in the Indian context. In this novel, Saddam Hussein, a friend of Anjum, has emerged as the representative of caste inequality of being a Dalit. Changing from Dayachand to Saddam Hussein, he has no identity as a subaltern. Later, his father became the victim of ‘cow-slaughter’ at the hand of an agitated mob. From a different perspective, as the oppression and social construction does not allow to speak then placing subaltern is as immigrant or refugee.

Tilo is a Dalit woman, her mother had a love affair with a man, who belongs to an ‘Untouchable’ caste and she can be identified as a subaltern figure. Despite all of these, Tilo continued to fight against the system of the silent revolutionist in many ways.

Conclusion

In the process of writing for the ‘subaltern’, it is visible that Arundhati Roy herself presented as a subaltern often. Before concluding, it is somehow quite clear that she always tries to sympathize with marginalized people. Representing ‘subaltern’ in literature is not in a colonial or Western framework, making a new connection with gendered spaces in subaltern thought. Above from the whole discussion, the evolution of ‘Subaltern’ to the present day the term has not

much changed. It stands for social discrimination, gender discrimination, transgender issues, caste problems, class, etc. Moreover, its emphasis on the victim of colonization system to the transgender issues in the society. As the novel goes, Anjum, being a transgender protagonist, is the victim of socio-political injustice. The graveyard and Khwabgah have been a representation of the New Subaltern space, it can be felt about the tragic transgender character.

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