



Reading Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*: A Tale of 'subalternity' and 'New Women'

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Abstract— Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* offers a profound exploration of the evolving roles and responsibilities of women in Indian society. As usual, Arundhati Roy showed us how to become a champion of the downtrodden. Her latest work *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is evidence of her promises towards society. Not only does she depict the inhuman condition of subalterns but she also projected them as new faces of subjugated people who fight against prejudice and unjust society. The faces which have defied the discriminatory social norms and set their journey of respect and identity. This research endeavour is taken to critically analyse the novel which reflects on the two different lives lived by the different women and transgender characters. It will analyse two different presentations of the same women's character. One character is, one who has lived a life of disrespect, humiliation, and oppression. Other characters are the same but the difference lies in their evolving personalities. The evolved women are more resilient, empowered, independent, publicly stand-alone and challenge societal norms. The perspectives of 'subalternity' will be analysed from Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak and the other scholars of the Subaltern Studies Group and the concept of 'New Women' will be analysed from the theory given by Sarah Grand. After analysing two different theoretical concepts the proposed studies will show how women and transgender subalterns become New Women in society.



Keywords— Subalternity, New Woman, Empowerment, Discrimination, Identity

I. INTRODUCTION

The term 'Subaltern' refers to marginalised groups or individuals, particularly those who are socially, politically, and economically oppressed. 'Subaltern Studies' took its root from an Italian thinker, Antonio Gramsci, who gave the concept of hegemony in his book *Prison Notebook*. Several thinkers from South Asia took inspiration from Gramsci's concept of hegemony and began the 'Subaltern Studies Group'. This group includes scholars like Ranajit Guha, David Arnold, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Partha Chatterjee, Gyanendra Pandey, Gyan Prakash, Sumit Sarkar, and others. These scholars focused on history and its making. The Subaltern Studies Group is a collective of postcolonial scholars who have primarily focused on analysing and challenging traditional power structures and hierarchies within society. While their work has predominantly centred

on issues related to class, caste, and race, the group also acknowledges the importance of gender and sexuality in understanding the position of subalternity. Concerning women, the Subaltern Studies Group recognizes the intersectionality of oppression, acknowledging that women from marginalised communities face multiple forms of discrimination based on their gender, class, caste, and other social identities. They argue that it is essential to analyse the specific challenges and experiences faced by women within subaltern communities, highlighting norms and structural marginalisation. When it comes to transgender individuals, the subaltern emphasizes the importance of recognizing and understanding the unique struggles faced by this marginalised group. For the Subaltern Studies group member, the major field of investigation was the peasants. The group's main concern was re-writing the history of

decolonized India. The discourse of subordination and resistance was limited to the peasants until Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak brought this into the field of literature and applied it to various groups of society. Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak's inseminal idea in the concept of subaltern has led to many different semantics meanings to it. Spivak questioned the very methodology of the Subaltern Studies Group of historiographies. While dismantling their notions of methodology she says that the group have tried to present subaltern history which they think that they did not have. In Spivak's opinion, subalterns have a voice but either it is unheard or ignored by the mainstream. According to Spivak: "Subaltern is not just a classy word for oppressed, for Other, for somebody who is not getting a piece of the pie...In postcolonial terms, everything that has limited or no access to cultural imperialism is subaltern – a space of difference" (Kock 45).

In her groundbreaking Spivak claimed that the subaltern could not speak but nowadays she claims: "The subaltern must be rethought. S/he is no longer cut off from access to centre" (Spivak 326). In Spivak's view, due to the changing face of global political, economic, and social scenarios, the condition of subalterns has also changed. These concerns of Spivak are identical to Arundhati Roy's concerns of subaltern. Roy, who is very critical of government agencies, often criticises government schemes and development projects which directly or indirectly impact the lives of lower caste, tribal, women, labourers, peasants, and children. Roy's first novel *The God of Small Things* brought much commotion in the Indian political, social, and literary ground because this novel largely dealt with the issue of Gender, and Caste. It has denuded the stark reality of the Indian social structure of caste and the system of patriarchy. But in this novel, the subaltern group of people remained, most of the time, passive and inert. Characters of Roy's novel was less vigorous. They do not pave the way for themselves to remove the shackles of dominance and hegemony. Often, they spoke but with a timid voice. After twenty years Roy published *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* which seems more promising to the Spivak view of 'New Subaltern'. This 'New Subaltern' will not remain silent on torture or any kind of dominance. The women and transgender subaltern who are presented in the latest novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, are resilient, empowering, and have bold voices to speak up. They are paving the way in the socially and politically dominated society. They use new strategies to navigate through dominance and hegemony. The women characters of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* are also the face of 'New Women' in the sense that they exhibit similarities such as gender oppression, resistance, and empowerment through education.

The concept of 'New Women' emerged in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century in Western societies as a response to changing social, economic, and political conditions. 'New Women' were independent, educated, and participated actively in various aspects of society. They challenged traditional gender roles and expectations. The term 'New Women' was coined by the author Sarah Grand in her article *The New Aspects of the Woman Question* but it was Henry James who developed the phrase 'New Woman'. Sarah Grand's writings, particularly her novel *The Heavenly Twins* played a significant role in promoting the 'New Woman' concept. The label of 'New Woman' is essentially used for an educated-modern woman but the fact that every woman who protests dominancy, discrimination and ill-treatment by society is a 'New Woman'. According to Grand:

Women were awaking from their long apathy, and, as they awoke, like healthy hungry children unable to articulate, they began to whimper for they knew not what. They might have been easily satisfied at that time had not society, like an ill-conditioned and ignorant nurse, instead of finding out what they lacked, shaken them and beaten them and stormed at them until what was once a little wail became convulsive shrieks and roused up the whole human household (Grand 271).

In the above sentences, Grand discusses the nuances of the 'New Women'. The traditional view of women as submissive and idealized is not what this new woman wants. Although times have changed, the issues faced by women have remained the same. Her works explored the challenges and constraints faced by women in the Victorian era and advocated for their right to self-determination and intellectual growth. 'The New Woman' is often depicted as assertive, career-oriented, and unafraid to challenge traditional gender roles. Other authors such as Juliet Gardiner, Elaine Showalter, George Egerton, and Grant Allen also supported this new concept.

II. THE MINISTRY OF UTMOST HAPPINESS

Arundhati Roy's writing style is known for its lyrical and poetic quality, and she employs a wide range of characters, each with unique stories and backgrounds, to depict the diversity of India. The novel is a powerful commentary on the socio-political landscape of the country and delves into issues such as the conflict in Kashmir, the struggles of transgender and the lives of marginalised communities. The novel employs and intricately weaves together multiple storylines and diverse perspectives, offering a profound reflection on the multifaceted nature of

Indian society. Within its pages, two major plots unfold: one revolves around Anjum, a transgender woman, while the other centres on Tilo, a South Indian woman with mysterious characteristics. Through Roy's vivid prose and a cast of characters drawn from all corners of Indian society, and thus, novel delves deep into the struggles faced by marginalized communities in India, addressing complex issues such as gender identity, religious diversity, caste dynamics, patriarchy, and communal tensions. Roy's intent in writing this novel is to reveal how power dynamics, be they political or social conflicts, profoundly impact the everyday lives of ordinary people and how marginalized communities strive for social justice.

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness stands apart from Roy's debut novel, *The God of Small Things*. The latter primarily focuses on the lives of three female characters – Rahel, Ammu, and Baby Kochamma – as they navigate a patriarchal society in Kerala. It portrays the oppression and constraints imposed on women and the consequences they face when challenging societal norms. In contrast, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* encompasses a broader range of characters and perspectives, including transgender and intersex individuals. Roy endows the characters in this novel with greater agency and voice. They especially women and transgender, are more assertive in claiming their rights and asserting their identities. Our society conditions individuals based on their biological sex from birth. Girls are taught to adhere to certain behaviors, dress codes, and roles deemed appropriate for women, while boys are conditioned to display their masculinity, often suppressing their emotions.

The first character in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* who stands out for showcasing solidarity with the woman who she wants to be is Anjum. Anjum, born intersex but initially gendered as a boy by her mother, was known as Aftab during childhood. This decision was made not because she was born a male but because her mother, Jahanara, feared that revealing Aftab's true intersex identity would lead to her being stigmatized like other hijras. As transgender woman Anjum experiences multiple forms of marginalization and oppression. Her identity as a *hijra* puts her in a socially stigmatized and marginalised position. She is further marginalised due to her gender identity, socio-economic status, and her choice to live in a graveyard. Anjum represents a subaltern character through whom Arundhati Roy explores the position of subalternity offering a perspective that is often excluded from mainstream discourse. However, Anjum's character takes several turns and her life is met with numerous ups and downs leading her into self-discovery, and resilience, which can challenge traditional notions of subalternity.

Once Gudiya tried to tell her that Hijras had a special place of love and respect in Hindu mythology. She told Kulsoom Bi the story of how, when lord Ram and his wife, Sita, and his younger brother Laxman were banished for fourteen years from their kingdom, the citizenry, who loved their king went. When they reached the outskirts of Ayodhya where the forest began, Ram turned to his people and said, 'I want all you men and women to go home and wait for me until I return'. Unable to disobey their king, the men and women returned home. Only the Hijras waited faithfully for him at the edge of the forest for the whole fourteen years, because he had forgotten to mention them. So, we are remembered as the forgotten ones? Ustad Kulsoom Bi said. Wah! Wah! (Roy 51).

Kulsoom Bi's reply to Gudiya's story reflects the irony and complexity of the situation of Hijras. While the Hijras's loyalty and faithfulness to lord Rama are commendable, the fact that he forgot to mention them implies that they were marginalised or overlooked in society. If, even the scripture did not give place to transgender people how do we expect our society to respect them? The condition of transgender people has not changed since the beginning in the society where Anjum lives. She must face the very discrimination the other marginalised communities face. But her determination to change the things of traditional way. She was not the kind who would look at the unjust and turn her head to avoid any skirmishes. She was fearless since the beginning. She the very portrayal of Roy's New Woman. Once Anjum uttered a revolting statement regarding her name's spelling. While uttering she also targeted the unjust notions of society. she said:

It doesn't matter. I'm all of them, I'm Roni and Juli, I'm Laila and Majnu. And Mujna, why not? Who says my name is Anjum? I'm not Anjum, I'm Anjuman. I'm a mehfil, I'm a gathering. Of everybody and nobody, of everything and nothing. Is there anyone else you would like to invite? Everyone's invited (Roy 4).

Anjum rejects the notion that their identity is confined to a specific gender. She identifies with both male and female figures from literature and history, emphasizing the fluidity of gender. Also, Anjum's self-identification as 'Mujna' suggests a non-binary, which challenges the binary concept of gender. This challenges the conventional understanding of gender as strictly male or female.

The second character that is Tilo, short for Tilottama, is portrayed as an independent and resilient woman. Her determination to live on her terms and her willingness to challenge societal norms make her a compelling character. The way she has been introduced by Roy appears to be a character who will remain subaltern in

attitude and behaviour but again Roy gives Tilo an evolving characteristic. Roy's introduction of Tilo's character marks her position and status:

Her mother was indeed her real mother, but had first abandoned her and then adopted her. There had been a scandal, a love affair in a small town. The man, who belonged to an 'Untouchable caste (a 'Paraya' Mammen P. Mammen whispered, as though even to say it aloud would contaminate him), had been dispensed with in the ways 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 which, over the years, had grown into a successful high school. She never publicly admitted – understandably – that she was the real mother (Roy 155).

In traditional Indian society, the love affair between an upper-caste woman and an untouchable man is treated as a scandal. Tilo's mother initially abandoned her due to social pressure and stigmas associated with her relationship with the untouchable man. In childhood, Tilo was placed in a Christian orphanage, reflecting that societal expectation is above motherly love. Tilo's mother was disowned by her family and to align with societal norms she remained unmarried. The character of Tilo is born subaltern and even lived life in the condition of subalternity but her revolting attitude never allowed her to be tamed by the expectations or the norms of the society. Tilo's decision to adopt Miss Zeebeen from the stairs of Jantar Mantar reflects her nature to fight with odds and give place to those who have no one. Again, her decision to marry Naga just after the death of Musa shows her mentality of decision-making. She married Naga that does not mean that she wanted to but to navigate this cruel society or take shelter she had to be married unless the society's expectation would have ruled out. This situation shows how individuals are often forced to make difficult choices in the face of societal expectations.

III. CONCLUSION

Arundhati Roy's novel serves as a mirror to Indian society's diverse and multifaceted nature, offering a powerful commentary on the complexities of gender identity, religious diversity, caste dynamics, patriarchy, and communal tensions. The characters of Tilo and Anjum showcase the resilience and evolving identities of marginalised communities. They defy traditional notions of subalternity and challenge societal expectations, thereby

embodying the 'New Subaltern' and 'New Women' who are no longer silent in the face of exclusion and discrimination. The Intersectionality of oppression faced by marginalised communities as discussed by the Subaltern Studies Group and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is the best interpretation to acknowledge the unique struggles based on gender, class, and caste. Furthermore, the concept of 'New Woman' resembles the subaltern women who do not conform to the roles they are assigned to. This is the reason they are more aligned with the characteristics of the 'New Woman'.

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