

# Representation of Subaltern in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

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**Abstract:-**Arundhati Roy's second novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is a camouflage of contemporary socio-political problems that are relevant to the study of "subaltern", specifically in South-Asian context. The novel is literally about everybody and everything happening in rapidly changing India, particularly about displaced and marginalized ones as the book is dedicated to "The Unconsoled." Through the protagonist or the main character of novel, transgender issue has been evoked. Other ongoing problems like gender discrimination, caste inequality, capitalism and many more socio-political facts have been equally addressed. Arundhati Roy is an active activist and has a prolific career with books on capitalism, globalization and democracy. Thus *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is undoubtedly and instinctively an outburst of author's observation of the "The New Subaltern" who are the victim of social and political unfair. So, the researcher aims at examining Roy's depiction of "The New Subaltern" in a setting of democratic India through her characters framing them into post-colonial situation. As the study of subaltern is ever-changing, the researcher also attempts to trace the development of the subaltern study in south Asia. The aim of this study is to impart a new dimension to the 'Subaltern Studies', in broad post-colonial literature studies by demonstrating Roy's perception of the new subaltern in presenting her novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. It also scrutinizes the novel in terms of its characters, language and socio-political context presented by author.

**Keywords:-** Subaltern, Marginalized, Oppressed, Suppressed

**Introduction:** *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* addresses the issues of the marginalized groups-transgender people, tribals, Dalits and religious minorities who are condemned groups and denied fundamental rights as human beings. Through many characters and with numerous stories that constantly intersect, Roy consistently writes through the lens of the poor, challenging the myth of a great country that is said to have benefited from neoliberalism. All these narratives woven together in the novel unmask the real face of the country where the dominant culture frequently otheres the powerless sections of the society and continues to suppress them. Anjum, the central character of the story, is both Muslim and a eunuch and therefore remains vulnerable in a society where religious orthodoxy against LGBT people and non-Hindus prevails. She survives the Gujarat massacre and remains anxious about the future of her own community, especially the younger generation. However, she gives hope for condemned groups to live with self-respect and dignity through Jannat Guest House in Delhi. It becomes refuge to an orphaned child of a tribal woman, Maoist insurgents enduring state repression, and a Dalit man who lost his father at the hands of Hindu fanatics terrorizing people in the name of a cow-protection campaign. Actually summarize this grand novel as this is a novel about 'everything, so much anguish and joy and love and war and death and life, so much of being human' (Felicell, 2017). Thus, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* celebrates as well as upholds the subaltern life with its character portrayal and narrative style. The characters like, Anjum, Saddam and Tilo are representative of subaltern who are denied fundamental rights as human being and are silenced by the

power structure of the country. These characters are subjugated, humiliated and marginalized by the hegemony.

The central character of the novel is a Hijra and in terms of rights they are the most marginalized people in a society particularly in South Asian context. Spivak in her work like “The Rani of Sirmur” argues how colonialism and patriarchy doubly combine to relegate women as subaltern. In terms of a 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 residing at Khawabgah tells Anjum “D’youknow why god made Hijra? [...] It was an experiment [...] a living creature that is incapable of happiness [...] 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.” The transgender people as subaltern, as Spivak claims have no history but they are always there in the society. In Khawabgah every Hijra begins to feel identity crisis to an extent as well as struggles for their place in history that is clearly evident from their visit to the “The Sound and Light show” at “The Red Fort”. Though UstadKulsoom Bi seems to be more satisfied with single sound in the “The Sound and Light show” that proves their existence in the history of Emperor’s time. The question instantly is evoked as Kulsoom Bi asked ‘so we are remembered as the forgotten ones?’ (51), when Gudiye tries to argue Hijras had a special place in “Hindu Mythology” saying ‘Only Hijras waited faithfully for him (Ram) at the edge of the forest for the whole fourteen years’ (51). Being almost absent from history, the little world of Khawabgah is not cut from the hegemonic Eurocentric line of cultural as well as economic domination which is claimed by Spivak. A clear example of such condition emerges when reference of Saeeda comes who ‘could speak the language of the times – she could use the term cis-Man and FtoM and MtoF’ (38). Sayeeda’s “western cloths” and the impact of 9/11 attack in American Trade Center on the life of Anjum and her fellow Hijras clearly announces that nobody even the subalterns are not out of the reach of such American and Eurocentric capitalist world. Though Hijras are denied of their identity, they are not out of the influence of the global chain.

Anjum, as a protagonist, is opulently portrayed in the first three chapter of the fiction but Sehgal (2017, 37) argues The Ministry of Utmost Happiness offers only a “tiny” portrayal of transgender people’s lives, struggles and triumphs. In “Arundhati Roy’s Fascinating Mess”, Sehgal (2017) condemns Anjum’s character as formulaic because of her “patched together body” and “partially realizes dreams”. In Sega’s word, Anjum does not really accomplish her goal. However, before this novel, no fiction has ever depicted a transgender protagonist’s life as well as the struggle so vividly and elaborately. Roy has projected Anjum in a positive light that is similar to Lertlaksanaporn who challenged Sehgal stating ‘The process of moving towards the goal is more important than the goal itself’ (2020). Anjum, like a thread, has brought all other marginalized people in one place, a graveyard and potentially becomes the representative of the subaltern as Anjum tells her friend Saddam: “Once you have fallen off the edge like all of us have, including our Biroo,’ Anjum says, ‘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 (84).’

Jannat Guest House is probably the most important setting of the novel. This graveyard not only has become a place of Anjum’s liberation and self-expression but also proved to function as ‘secular, sanctuary, protected by willpower from the turbulent outside world (Clark, 2018).’ By making Jannat Guest House a prominent setting, Roy attempted giving a structure to her lavish dream of democracy. Roy graciously tries to redefine democracy making the graveyard a ‘mehfil, a gathering of everybody and nobody, of everything and nothing. [...] Everyone’s invited.’ Although Anjum started and is the owner of Jannat Guest House,

here each and every person is free and it has become ‘a hub for Hijras [...] had fallen out of, or been expelled from the tightly administered grid of HijraGharanas (68).’ Thus as subaltern Anjum and other marginalized people gather in Jannat Guest House and evidently sail to form a new identity with freedom and liberation. Lertlaksanaporn (2020) claims Deleuze and Guttari’s concept of rhizome can be identified in this context as they have come to Jannat Guest House and their departure cut across the normative line of hetero normative society and the hierarchical system of the Khwabgah through the line of flight. Spivak opposes this view and claims that Gilles Deleuze has neglected “The epistemic violence of imperialism” (1988, 289). Within a Western framework, Spivak states that the subaltern cannot express their true self. But here, Roy’s portrayal of Hijras as subaltern is quite different as they walk towards the possibilities of becoming. Similar view is given by Lertlaksanaporn (2020) as he argues: “The process of writing or speaking for the subaltern is not to present or subjugate the subaltern into the western framework, but its aim is the process of becoming through the establishment of new connections. The writer or the speaker will become Other or become minor in the open space where the voice of the subaltern can be heard.” So Jannat Guest House can be called a Utopia that ultimately turns out to be a paradise for these subalterns. Representation of the “Subaltern” in terms of caste is also highlighted by the writer. Caste inequality is most common accepted social problem in South Asia, particularly in India. One of the significant characters in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is Saddam, a friend of Anjum as well as a Dalit who becomes a model of caste inequality. The issue of “Untouchability” as well as the question of subaltern arises with the entrance of Saddam as social structure permits him to express limitedly. Saddam in this fiction can be considered as the fictional representation of the subaltern. He lacks artistic articulation of a fictional character except some limited details like “literate, pleasant-looking man in good health (75).” Though is a minor character and has little artistic articulation, Saddam’s story is very important as Roy (2017) told ‘I wanted even the smallest character to have a story. I wanted the background to sometimes become the foreground.’

Saddam as a subaltern has no identity as he has to change his name from “Dayachand” to “Saddam Hossain” and his constant struggle to be fixed in a job indicates how subalterns are socially and economically deprived. Saddam becomes the “part of the mob” and this agitated mob kills Saddam’s father in charge of “cow-slaughter.” The irony is that even a cow’s life is more important than a Dalit’s life. However, some critics like Lahiri (2017) criticizes “the dialogue between Anjum and Saddam over his past” and claims “it as a ruse to explain caste rituals in detail that overload the immediate narrative flow” as well as “inelegant information nuggets.” Though inartistic description, this very detail can well picture the enduring form of social norm of caste system. At another place of the novel, similar incident takes place again. Roy acclaims the real circumstance saying ‘they accuse you of eating beef and then take over your house and your land and send you to a refugee camp. It’s all about property, not cows (402).’ From this statement, it is clear that the benefit of this kind of oppressive incident directly goes to patent holding corporates placing subalterns at the risk of being immigrant or refugee. Against this process they have nothing to do or say as the social construction does not allow them to speak.

The narratives of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* evolve around a female character, Tilo, a half Dalit wondering women. If we recall Spivak’s notion of “subaltern” as a gendered category in which women are doubly effaced, Tilo can be identified as an obvious subaltern figure. The family background of Tilo is important in this regard as Tilo’s mother had an affair with “the man, who belonged to an ‘untouchable caste,’ has been dispensed with in ways high- caste families in India – in this case Syrian Christians from Kerala” and consequently “Her family disowned her (155).” This easily reminds us of Ammu and Velutha’s love affair and both of the affairs are relevant to the representation of subaltern as Tickell (2007) suggested ‘by staging Ammu and Velutha’s affair as one of the central events of *The God of Small Things*, Roy seems

to suggest a possible commonality in their – differently experienced – subalternity.’ Here Maryam Ipe and her low caste lover like Ammu and Velutha “represent the oppressive intersection of historically sanctioned forms of subordination (in this case caste and gender) that make up the theoretical category of the subaltern.” Tilo, by born a half - Dalit as well as a subaltern doesn’t display any feature of conventional sophisticated lady. In 2017 Roy told in her interview ‘Tilo does not react in ways that women are expected to, and this puts everything out of Kitter.’ Tilo, being an independent girl lives alone does whatever she likes. Being a single woman, she is a subtle threat to the orthodox patriarchal structure of society where a woman cannot live alone. At the same she is vulnerable in a structured society as BiplabDasgupta described her “like a paper boat on a boisterous sea (160).” Spivak (1991) argues that Hindu women “disappeared, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling, which is the displaced figuration of the ‘third-world woman’ caught between tradition and modernization.” Similarly, being a third world woman, Tilo is caught between tradition and modernization. Though Tilo is educated and independent, BiplabDasgupta couldn’t marry her because his ‘Brahmin Parents, would never accept her – the girl without a past, without a caste – into the family (161).’ Despite all of these, Tilo continues her fight against the system and “The background story of a troubled relationship with her mother clarifies little Tilo’s quiet yet determined resistance to the system (Lahiri, 2017).” Thus, Tilo proves herself as a silent revolutionist and a ground breaker.

**Conclusion:-***The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* presents the unbearable conditions of the subaltern. From the examination of the representation of the “subaltern” it is clear that the condition of the subaltern have not changed much. In colonial time they were the victim of colonization and now they are the victim of a subtle and sustainable social cycle of domination that is structured by socialized capitalism. In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* majority of the character can be categorized as subaltern in terms of gender, caste, class etc. It also shows how Anjum, the transgender protagonist being the victim of social political deprivation, sails to build a paradise of her own where falling people from all corner of the society gathered. The novel analyses the worst situation of discrimination in the name of caste inequality. It also shows Roy’s portrayal of the vulnerability of subaltern in globalized city and capitalist society.

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