

Voice of the Margin in Literature: Reading Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

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Abstract

*This research article is an attempt to explore the humiliated condition of transgender in Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. The humiliation made on different people in the society by the upper class people has been depicted in the novel. Roy has presented the discrimination faced by the different people in a subtle way. The injustice over the Hindu people in India and the marginalized Muslim and the conflict among them has been portrayed artistically. The novel presents the dark side of an Indian society in the modern history. She upholds the rights of voiceless people and attempts to raise their voice which could be heard around the globe.*

Key Words: voice, voiceless, marginal, minorities, subaltern, prejudice etc.

Introduction

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is a fictional novel which presents the stories about the people affected by the situation, religious mentalities, and social rules. It is very difficult to find the happiness among all these situations. Roy's writing is not simply a fictional work as it covers many facts and the bitter events in the history of modern India. So, it covers a phenomena which becomes common in most of the societies around the world. Roy wanted to make us see the things with lot of sensitivity to these issues and situations.

Published in 2017, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* flashes some of the worst events in the history of modern India. The people in the country have been put into the extreme poverty which made serious effect in the country and its economy. Most of the characters in the novel are associated with train-burning incident, revolt in Kashmir insurgency and some nationalist movements. The major characters in the novel are dissatisfied with the existing system of the country. They are against the state politics which uses religion as a political agenda. The central character Anjum is not accepted in the society because of her transgender status. The thought of spending a normal life haunts her time and again and she is traumatized. This leads her to the height when she sees the mass killing in the violent public disorder in Gujrat of 2002.

Caste system in Indian society is a disgusting side. On the one hand the country is in the process of attaining the position of super power by the innovation of science and technology. On the other, the country still practices the caste system where a section of the people is marginalized and discriminated in the society.

Anjum used the word Chamar and not Dalit, the more modern and accepted term for those that Hindus considered to be 'untouchable', in the same spirit in which she refused to refer to herself as anything other than Hijra. She didn't see the problem with either Hijras or Chamars. (46)

Roy has visualized this discrimination in the novel where a Dalit worker cleans the toilet in Indian Railway Station open handed. The open discharge toilets are cleaned without gloves on hand. The class and caste discrimination in the Indian society create hindrances for the prosperity and development of the nation. The subtle irony lies with the dogmatic practices in the society within the country where country is taken as modern India. People who are dalits are humiliated by the upper caste people. So, they change their name to attain their separate identity in the society. It is their compulsion for adjustment otherwise they can not survive in that society. In the novel Dayachand has chosen the new name as Saddam Hussain. It was not his real name. His real identity would be hidden. In fact he was born, "into a family of Chamars in a village called Badshahpur in the state of Haryana, only a couple of hours away by bus from Delhi(46)". Saddam further says that when an animal dies in the village the upper-caste farmers called them to collect the dead body. The upper-caste farmers did not manage the dead body of the animals on their own. They hire the lower-cast people from the village to manage it because "they couldn't pollute themselves by touching them (46)". They can neither protest nor speak against this discrimination. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak" expresses the same notion where the marginalized class can not make any voice in the society. Even if they make effort to raise their voice, they are unheard. Spivak clearly asserts that subaltern people cannot speak themselves. Instead, they have got to be represented. There can be no unrepresentable subaltern group. If knowledge is power, knowledge is privilege, than subaltern subjects are denied to have access to it. Moreover, they do not have the privileged position from where they can express themselves. They have to be represented by the elite intellectuals. But, the problem with representation, however, is that the subaltern's voice gets overshadowed by the very investigator's voice. She further says:

The small peasant proprietors cannot represent themselves: they must be presented. Their representing must appear simultaneously as their master, as an authority over them, as unrestricted governmental power that protects them from the other classes and send them rain and sunshine from above. (71)

Ray has expressed the pain and suffering of the untouchables in the society. In the novel she says, "In some countries, some soldiers die twice"(150). The tension in the novel is created when an Untouchable man's statue put up at the entrance particularly not an Untouchable who carried a weapon. The people started talking about it and its message in the society. The orthodox could not digest it. After three weeks the rifle on the soldier was omitted. Sepoy's family wanted to file a case in the police station but the police denied filing a case on it saying that it would have been built from the low grade materials. People belonging to the same cast started a protest. They went for a hunger strike. Even the state power was not making

justice on them. Instead, "A local court said it would constitute a magisterial committee to look into the matter. In the meanwhile it ordered a status quo. The hunger strike was discontinued. The magisterial committee was never constituted" (150).

Muslims in India are reflected to be treated in inhuman way. There are several reasons behind this. Even within the same group belonging to the same religion, they have divided themselves into Shia and Sunni. They have some hostile feeling to each other. It is not only the people rather the state and the rulers are also do not make justice on them. Ray further asserts:

Just as Pakistan had declared itself an Islamic Republic, India should declare itself a Hindu one. Some of its supporters and ideologues openly admired Hitler and compared the Muslims of India to the Jews of Germany. Now, suddenly, as hostility towards Muslims grew, it began to seem to the Organization that the whole world was on its side. The Poet-Prime Minister made a lisping speech, eloquent, except for long, exasperating pauses when he lost the thread of his argument, which was quite often. He was an old man, but had a young man's way of tossing his head when he spoke, like the Bombay film stars of the 1960s. 'The Mussalman, he doesn't like the Other,' he said poetically in Hindi, and paused for a long time, even by his own standards. 'His Faith he wants to spread through Terror.' (26)

Ray has presented the horrible situation of caste system in India of the then period. Ray has offered the story of the marginalized who were prejudiced and treated as a people from marginalized class or subaltern group. Subaltern Studies entered into the realm of literature after Spivak rendered the linguistic as well as literary mode. She, in her seminal article "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography", announces that subaltern studies is not much concerned with change but with the representation of consciousness or culture of the subaltern classes. She is of the argument that the Subaltern cannot manifest themselves in their own language, for their language is not sanctioned by the society. They have to take recourse to the socially sanctioned language while writing anything, to be specific, literature. The literature as such cannot represent them truly. Nevertheless, the subaltern did not stop writing the literature, rather they, like the deconstructionists; aim at dismantling the binary oppositions like elite/ subaltern; superior / inferior; one / other, etc. This project is rather a positive one as it aspires to investigate, discover and establish a subaltern or peasant consciousness. The characters in the novel are in search of security and specific identity. Their identity is in crisis which causes suffering. Ray expresses:

Begum Renata was a belly dancer from Romania who grew up in Bucharest dreaming of India and its classical dance forms. "When she was only nineteen she hitchhiked across the continent and arrived in Delhi where she found a mediocre Kathak guru who exploited her sexually and taught her very little dance. (35)

As for the concern of the representation of the Subaltern, it is explicit that they cannot

speak themselves because of their inaccessibility to the national policies and programs. Subaltern groups are subaltern not only because of the exploited position that they occupy as the bearers of political and economic exploitation but also because they lack language or the discourse to make themselves heard. Spivak, in this reference, opines that subaltern groups can not represent themselves. They cannot speak within the web of historical and linguistic context within which they find themselves. Nations and civil communities have their own forms of permitted speech and codes of expression but the subaltern are devoid of their own permitted speech and codes. Their voices can find expression only by mastering the basic codes of those socially approved speech conventions. They have to adopt others language where they cannot find their voices expressed. To express their voices; to make their solid identity, they have to use their own language, but their own language is not sanctioned by the society. As a result, they are compelled to follow the language of the elite.

If the subalterns want their language to have existence, they have to satisfy the demands of these civil and linguistic codes of the socially approved language. In course of satisfying these demands the subaltern almost loses its originality and becomes paralyzed in the end. In such a circumstance, how can we guarantee the true representation of the Subaltern even in the subaltern language? Such a representation is not representation but a misrepresentation.

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During his days as a fugitive, Musa moved from place to place, never the same place on consecutive nights. There were always people around him – in forest hideouts, in businessmen's plush homes, in shops, in dungeons, in storerooms – wherever the tehreek was welcomed with love and solidarity. He learned everything about weapons, where to buy

them, how to move them, where to hide them, how to use them.(162)

The corruption in all political groups, conflict between Hindus and Muslims, untouchability, gender discrimination etc have created the violence in the society. These characters are bound to be silent where this fiction serves a medium of their expression.

Conclusion

Through the novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* Ray demonstrates the social injustice and prejudice prevailed in the modern Indian society. She expresses that these people who face these problems are bound to be silent because their voice is not heard. They come across all the tyrannies and torture ranging from the untouchability to gender discrimination. She dives deep into the minds and the lives of her protagonist unpacking their complexities and contradictions as they in turn navigate and sometimes even change and impact a perilous and unjust world this has already been hailed as a novel about identity politics the winds of change. It is a story of human resilience and Arundhati Roy always returns to those that this novel has been dedicated to heartbroken people. Her representation has given voice to the voiceless people and she advocates for the change to create the betterment in the society.

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