Arundhati Roy’s Commitment for the Subaltern Cause: An Exploration of The Ministry of Utmost Happiness

Dr. Pankaj Yadav
1Assistant Professor (On Lien), Department of English, Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose Govt. Girls P.G. College, Aliganj, Lucknow

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Abstract

Arundhati Roy’s international fame rests not only on her The God of Small Things winning the Booker Prize but more so on her activism for the subalterns in India for whose cause she had been a vocal fighter for more than two decades. The novel The Ministry of Utmost Happiness is a part of that vocal narrative that brings the concerns of women, Dalits, and the hijra community. The research paper “Arundhati Roy’s Commitment for the Subaltern Cause: An Exploration of The Ministry of Utmost Happiness” explores the subaltern consciousness and sensibilities of present-day India to manifest the ways how the new India needs to take into account the subaltern concerns.

Keywords:
Arundhati Roy, Commitment, Dalit, Hijra, Post-colonial, Small things, Subaltern, The Ministry of Utmost Happiness

Writing about a postcolonial writer is always getting into a political act. When it is Arundhati Roy, it is more of choice to “commitment” to the downtrodden sections of the society who often lack a voice of their own and needs to be represented in different forums for not just adequate representation but also for the sake of getting what is rightfully due to them constitutionally and otherwise. After the success of The God of Small Things which won the prestigious Booker Prize, Roy delved into activism and pursued her writing career sporadically in non-fictional works that narrated her concerns with the marginalized and victimized people in the world, especially from India. Keeping along with his activism and concern for the subaltern, Roy’s recent novel The Ministry of Utmost Happiness has also similarly attempted to deal with the subalterns who are being victimized for a long time and are never able to voice their concerns in appropriate forums for the lack of knowledge of means and ways to protest. Moreover, their financial and cultural (caste, class and gender) status does not allow them to attain what is rightfully due. In the paper “Arundhati Roy’s Commitment for the Subaltern Cause: An Exploration of The Ministry of Utmost Happiness”, an attempt has been made to understand the ways in which Arundhati Roy not just traces the unfair, unjust and ill-thought ways in which the victimized lot live their lives, but also tries to give voice to these subalterns through her literary endeavour. It is a political choice that she has made, which shows her commitment to the cause of the
subalterns, making her a protesting literary and cultural voice of the present-day India.

Indian culture has had moments of greatness in historic times; it also has moments of achievements in the ways by which people across all communities participated in the struggle to do away with the colonial forces; it also had a strong standing in the present-day international political scenario because of its industrial development as well as agricultural reforms. Yet, many sections of Indian society are still reeling under the pressures of the mainstream reforms, which do not take the concerns of the subalterns. Arundhati Roy takes these issues in her socially active life as well as in her literary and non-literary writings as she feels that writing is also a politically motivated act to seek justice for the people who are left out of the developmental programmes and who somehow are the victimized lot because of these programmes. No development in a nation should happen at the cost of its citizens. If such a thing happens, it is no development at all. The expression of this political protest against the mainstream developmental processes has been one of the concerns of Roy, apart from the aesthetic brilliance that she achieves in her literary writings. And The Ministry of Utmost Happiness is no different in this context. Though after a gap of about two decades, Roy ventures into literary writing, but the pledge for the upliftment of the oppressed that she showed in The God of Small Things has not in any way died down. However, it has sharpened to a greater extent and has made her a more prominent subaltern voice (Clark, 2017).

Subaltern studies have gained currency in India and international academic circles with the Subaltern Studies group making its theoretical parameters strong. In the essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, Gayatri Spivak argues how the intellectuals need to take the mantle of speaking on behalf of the subaltern. “Strategic essentialism”, the term used by Spivak, refers to the ways in which marginalized groups may temporarily put aside local differences to forge a sense of collective identity, which can then be deployed for the political ends. For instance, Spivak uses strategic essentialism in furthering her concept of the “subaltern”. Spivak’s observation is that such terms or labels result in problematic and unstable groupings that erase significant differences and distinctions. Yet, these acts of identity formation support important political ends. In her writings, Arundhati Roy, being an ardent critic of social injustice, had always fought for the cause of the subaltern. Similar to Spivak’s idea of “strategic essentialism”, Roy temporarily puts the differences in the circumstances of the different subaltern groups to make way for a kind of a bundle of voices to manifest how it has been the most significant marker of the present-day politics in India.

One of India’s foremost reasons for inequality has been its caste system, against which Roy had been vocal and made it one of the themes in The Ministry of Utmost Happiness. Her commitment to the ‘small things’ is already well-known and manifests in the novel where Roy portrays the hijra community. One of the central characters of The Ministry of Utmost Happiness is a hijra as they are made to live a marginalized existence in the Indian society and they are thought to be “the other” who are usually being measured as a means to speak of the binary of normal and abnormal (Lertlaksanaporn, 2020). The socio-political deprivation and the cultural means of looking at the transgender make them live a life outside the mainstream. Thus, there is no doubt about their subaltern status. Roy makes a transgender Nimmo speak to Anjum in these terms – “D’y you know 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” (Roy, 2017: 23). The riot happens inside the subaltern, yet they are the ones who are the victimized lot. Their voices are never heard, and they remain in the outskirts of society without even a proper acknowledgement of the mainstream society. Thus, the transgender issue remains vital to the theme of this novel. However, it is being said that apart from the first three chapters of the novel, Anjum as a protagonist, does not have much role to play in the novel (Sehgal, 2017: 37). Even though Anjum does not have that great a presence in the novel in terms of the physical space, Anjum’s presence in bringing together all the marginalized people makes her a significant character. Anjum tells Saddam, “Once you have fallen off the edge like all of us have, including our Biroo ... 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).

The idea that all the supposedly “falling” people need to come together to form a kind of community to look after the cause of each other is what makes the subaltern bonhomie in the novel very significant. When the mainstream carries on marginalizing and victimizing the subalterns, they must form their little society to look after their own needs, if not able to voice a protest against the mainstream. Roy seems to be providing her subaltern characters with a voice of their own where the subaltern gets together. By making Jannat Guest House a prominent setting, Arundhati Roy attempted to map her idea of a democracy.

Similarly, the character of Saddam, whose real name is “Dayachand”, represents the caste inequality in India. He is a friend of Anjum and a Dalit whose life has been a series of victimized existence. He constantly needs to look for jobs for his daily living as the subalterns in
India do not have a job guarantee. Socially and economically deprived, the Dalits have to live under constant fear. It is very indignantly presented by Roy when he talks about the incident of how the accusation of eating beef is used as a pretext to drive out the Dalits and take away their property.

Furthermore, Tilo, the half-Dalit woman, represents the doubly victimized female. Her mother had an affair with a man of an untouchable caste and thus was disowned by her family. Tilo lives alone and is a threat to the patriarchal notion of subordination (Suleman et al., 2020). Women are always supposed to live under the protection of a man and serve his wishes and demands. If a woman decides to stay alone, she is defying the order of the patriarchal society. Tilo does the same to some extent, yet she is presented as someone who is caught between tradition and modernity like almost all third world women. Though she is educated and independent, her marriage with Biplab Dasgupta could not materialize as the Brahminical order would not accept such a woman as Tilo to be a wife of Biplab. Interestingly, Biplab describes her as “a paper boat on a boisterous sea” (Roy, 160). All subalterns are similarly so as they live, and existence depends on the mercy of the sea. Yet, through her silent means to live independently, Tilo provides a critique of the system and seems to be the new subaltern who does not voice her protest through words but with her living.

Thus, Arundhati Roy in The Ministry of Utmost Happiness makes a constant critique of the mainstream society by representing how women, Dalits, hizras – the victimized and outcaste of the society – are making their presence felt in the growing consciousness and how the mainstream needs to acknowledge their presence while providing what is rightfully due to them. It is the commitment of Roy for the victimized as well as the “small things” which makes her take such a stand and bring to the knowledge of the readers how they need to change their perceptions and sensibilities not just to accommodate the concerns of the subalterns, but also to acknowledge that they exist. In an independent nation, the subalterns are the victims of developmental processes that do not consider their concerns. As a writer and an activist, it is Roy’s and our duty to recognize the societal and political norms that go into their colonization and victimization.

Work Cited


