

The Structural Impetus and Space in Arundhati Roy's works

Aishwarya Mohan

M. A.

University of Madras

Chennai, India

Abstract

Arundhati Roy's fictions, *The God of Small Things* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, are primarily based on the lives and cultures of the marginalised people. While the former text deals with the issue of caste system in Kerala, a state in South India; the latter explores the position of Hijras and the issue of political victimisation in Kashmir. Influenced from the concepts of 'Heterotopia' and 'Thirdspace' from Michael Foucault and Edward Soja (who also uses and extends Homi K. Bhabha's 'Third Space') respectively, this paper focuses on the representation of the lives of marginalised people within its cultural context. A synthesis of heterotopia and Thirdspace get represented in the works of Arundhati Roy.

While heterotopias are ubiquitous, they are diverse and operates within different cultural and social contexts. They exist in different forms. More than classic examples of heterotopia such as bars, brothels, prisons and museums, the postcolonial comprises of some unique heterotopias, for instance, the caste system. The paper will venture into the function of the heterotopic spaces, and the development from yielding in to embracing the heterotopic identity from *The God of Small Things* to *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* leading to a reversal of the 'other'.

Keywords: Caste, Gender, Heterotopic identity, Space, Structure, Thirdspace

Introduction

Arundhati Roy, an Indian author and political activist, known for her Booker Prize-winning book *The God of Small Things*. Before she published *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* in 2017, she authored various non-fiction books, such as *The End of Imagination*, *The Cost of Living*, *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*, *Power Politics*, *War Talk*, etc. In Roy's *The God of Small Things*, the reflection of heterotopia is twofold: pertaining to the caste system and gender. As Poyner says, 'Caste is presented in the novel as highly deterministic' (56). Velutha, an untouchable and Ammu, a divorcee become victims of the established caste system and gender inequality respectively. *The God of Small Things* narrated in fragments shifts between scenes in 1969 and 1993. The narrative begins when Ammu lives with her twin children Rahel and Estha in her family house in Ayemenem with her brother, Chacko; mother, Mammachi; and aunt, Baby Kochamma. The main tragedies of the plot: death of Sophie Mol, Chacko's daughter with his ex-wife Margaret and the revelation of Ammu's affair with Velutha serve as the linchpins of the

novel. When Rahel and Estha escape to their hideout, 'The History House', which is on the other side of the river Meenachal, Sophie Mol, too, unexpectedly accompanies them. Sophie Mol drowns as the boat capsized, but Rahel and Estha reached the house terrified and fell asleep unaware of Velutha's presence. Baby Kochamma accuses Velutha of kidnapping the children and trying to rape Ammu to Inspector Thomas Mathew. The next day, Velutha gets beaten up by the policemen in front of Rahel and Estha. When Thomas Mathew finds Velutha innocent, Baby Kochamma manipulates Estha and Rahel to say to Thomas Mathew that Velutha killed Sophie Mol in order to save Ammu. Velutha dies in prison and Estha returns to Calcutta to stay with his father. Ammu dies at thirty-one.

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness tells the shattered stories of shattered people. Anjum, a hijra (a transwoman), born as Aftab, the long-awaited son of Jahanara Begum and Mulaqat Ali. Though the later half of the novel deals with the Kashmir conflict, this paper highlights the story of Anjum. Anjum adopts a deserted child found outside the mosque, names her Zainab. Her experience of being a victim of 2002 anti-muslim riots, alienates her more and more from the society that rejects her. Finally, she ends up living in a graveyard with Saddam Hussain, a Dalit who vows to kill the man responsible for his father's death. She names the graveyard 'Jannat House' and runs a funeral service for all the outcasted people in the city. From Anjum's story, the novel takes off the readers to the valley of Kashmir putting front the India-Pakistan conflict over Kashmir. The second half of the novel mainly revolves around four characters - S. Tilottama, Nagaraj Hariharan, Biplab Dasgupta and Musa Yeshwi. Musa's wife and daughter are killed in a massacre in Kashmir, however, Musa and Tilo are taken captive by the military for documenting the Kashmir conflict. Tilo, too, adopts a baby who was abandoned on a pavement and names her Miss. Jebeen the Second after the late Musa's daughter. Tilo, too, becomes a part of the Jannat House. In the end, Jannat House becomes a welcoming space for the outcasted. Saddam and Zainab marry, and almost all the major characters unite in the Jannat House that represents a ministry of utmost happiness.

Space and Structure

The neglect of space, as Soja describes, '[s]patiality tends to be peripheralized into the background as a reflection, container, stage, environment, or external constraint upon human behaviour and social action' (71). He re-establishes the connection between a structured system and space influenced by the works of Henri Lefebvre, Jorge Louis Borges and Homi K. Bhabha. Transcending binaries, in Thirdspace 'everything comes together'. While Foucault dealt with the other spaces that simultaneously function connected within a society, he did not delve into notion of space as a site of cultural production which resulted from a structured culture like post-colonial scholars. Accordingly, Thirdspace to Soja:

is a space of extraordinary openness, a place of critical exchange where the geographical imagination can be expanded to encompass a multiplicity of perspectives that have heretofore been considered by the epistemological referees to be incompatible, uncombinable. It is a space where issues of race, class, and gender can be addressed simultaneously without privileging one over the other. (5)

As opposed to the ideology of utopia, Foucault's concept of heterotopia exists in all culture but in varied forms. 'But the heterotopias obviously take varied forms, and perhaps no one

absolutely universal heterotopia would be found' (Foucault and Miskowiec 24). On broadly dividing heterotopic spaces into two: crisis heterotopia and heterotopia of deviation, the system of caste completely fits into neither of the categories. In crisis heterotopia, individuals in crisis: menstruating women, pregnant women, adolescents, the elderly, etc. reserve a heterotopic space. Pertaining to the issue of caste and gender, in its socio-cultural background, the heterotopic identity is enforced structurally. The heterotopias of deviation are for those individuals whose behaviour is out of the norms of the mainstream.

While heterotopia is defined as 'the other spaces' that function outside the standard conditioning of the society, Thirdspace becomes the hub of new identity, cultural production and resistance as it defies and reprioritises an established system. In both the novels, the marginalized occupy very little space in the material world. Spatiality in terms of physical and mental terms, the main characters, Anjum's life in the cemetery or Velutha's life in an isolated space across the river Meenachal, remain connected yet isolated within an established structure. In *The God of Small Things*, both Ammu and Velutha, who tried to break the social norms, died yielding in to the fate of their heterotopic identity; in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Anjum, too, struggles with her heterotopic identity but creates a Thirdspace, an inclusive space that emancipate relegated communities and transcends binaries.

Space in Arundhati Roy's works

The heterotopic identity follows the pattern of a chain reaction in *The God of Small Things* as the relegation starts with Velutha based on his caste; then to Ammu, firstly, for being a divorcee, secondly, for her affair with Velutha; and then to her twin children. The rigid line of demarcation between treating Sophie Mol, the son's daughter and the twins affirm the rooted inequalities that is later challenged by Ammu and Velutha by confining themselves to a Thirdspace. However, their act of resistance and defiance surrender to the established order of the society. Ammu endeavours to save Velutha, too, becomes hopeless. The structural functionality is fundamental in determining human behaviour and is deterministic. Ammu and Velutha are caught and dead within this structural web as '[t]hey all broke the rules. They all crossed into forbidden territory. They all tampered with the laws that lay down who should be loved and how. And how much' (Roy, *The God* 31). The fate that befalls Ammu and Velutha delineate the staunch diffusion of historically established structure and its eminent growth greater than the power that established it. And 'Estha and Rahel learned how much history negotiates its terms and collects its dues from those who break its laws' (Roy, *The God* 55). The discrimination against Ammu and her children are caused due to their venture of breaking the laws that are integral for the functioning of its society.

They sensed somehow that she lived in the penumbral shadows between two worlds, just beyond the grasp of their power. That a woman they had already damned, [...] could therefore be dangerous. [...] As for a divorced [...], she had no position anywhere at all. (Roy, *The God* 44-45)

Considering the statement against the backdrop of Indian cultural context, a divorcee, particularly if it is a woman, occupies very little space even in her own family. While Chacko, too, being a divorcee, the society's confinement of his actions and the space he occupies remains unaltered. Rahel and Estha, too, face discrimination as '[t]hey provided the care (food, clothes,

fees), but withdrew the concern' (Roy, *The God* 15). Driven by guilt of Velutha's death, Estha slowly withdrew from the world. His enforced muteness, his inability to break through the structure signs his acceptance of his heterotopic identity. In a way, Estha and Rahel were treated by the Ayemenem household like they treated Velutha, and they were accepted inside the household for they were high born, unlike Velutha. Even the political parties are reluctant to emancipate and challenge the established hierarchies and they function within the structural setup as a part of it. The structural impetus is significant in the movement of plot in *The God of Small Things*. The spatial manifestations are culturally embedded.

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Anjum struggles with her heterotopic identity of being a transwoman. Two instances prove significantly the functionality of Thirdspace: the Khwabgah and the Jannat Guest House. Both these places remain inclusive irrespective of gender and religion while other major incidents in the novel perceive the two as an inseparable part of the structure. In Khwabgah,

Mary was the only Christian among the residents of the Khwabgah. She did not go to church, but she wore a little crucifix around her neck. Gudiya and Bulbul were both Hindus and did occasionally visit temples that would allow them in. The rest were Muslim. They visited the Jama Masjid and those dargahs that allowed them into the inner chambers (because unlike biological women Hijras were not considered unclean since they did not menstruate). (Roy, *The Ministry* 21)

Like caste in *The God of Small Things*, religion plays a vital role in dealing with spatiality. Though Anjum relegated from the society for being a transwoman her experience of being a victim in the Gujarat riots shattered her perspectives on reality. 'Only one place for the Mussalman! The Graveyard or Pakistan!' (Roy, *The Ministry* 62). Ultimately, she settles in a cemetery at the outskirts of the city, isolated from the rest of the world. Slowly her heterotopic space that she shares with Saddam Hussain becomes the Thirdspace for the marginalised. Defying the social hierarchies, gender and religious inequalities, the cemetery becomes the counterspace.

While people in the Khwabgah and Jannat house are isolated by the mainstream, through the end these people form a community that emancipates inequalities, reverses the ideology of the other and celebrates their heterotopic identity. As Thirdspace not only reimagines existing structures but also to provide a more radical attempt to break with the existing power structures and dynamics (Meskell-Brocken 244).

Conclusion

Anjum's hatred with the real-world order and structure as she says, '[w]e've come from there ... from the other world' (Roy, *The Ministry* 110) leads her form a counter world as opposed to reality in the cemetery. An action that embraces the significance of the political within the Thirdspace, suggesting that 'combining the real and imagined, things and thought on equal terms, or at least not privileging one over the other *a priori*, these lives spaces of representation are thus the terrain for the generation of "counterspaces"' (p. 68). The development form accepting the heterotopic identity to embracing it, defying the structural dynamics and reversing the notion of being 'the other' are the main propositions the article unfurled.

Finally, the paper presented the emergence of Thirdspace in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* as a conglomeration of imagination and real; complex and connected; multiple patterns of culture; past and present, and with all its complexity and richness the Thirdspace seem independent of hierarchies.

Works Cited

- Foucault, Michel, and Jay Miskowiec. "Of Other Spaces." *Diacritics*, vol. 16, no. 1, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986, pp. 22–27, <https://doi.org/10.2307/464648>.
- Meskell-Brocken, Steph. "First, Second and Third: Exploring Soja's Thirdspace Theory in Relation to Everyday Arts and Culture for Young People." *Developing a Sense of Place: The Role of the Arts in Regenerating Communities*, edited by Tamara Ashley and Alexis Weedon, UCL Press, 2020, pp. 240–54, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1453kbw.23>.
- Poyner, Jane. "Subalternity and Scale in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*." *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, vol. 51, no. 3, University of Manitoba, 2018, pp. 53–69, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26974110>.
- Roy, Arundhati. *The God of Small Things*. Penguin, 1997.
- . *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Penguin, 2017.
- Soja, Edward. *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and other Real-and-Imagined place*. 1996