

Exploring the Theme of Subaltern in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

Himakhi Phukan

M.A., M.Phil, UGC-NET, SLET(NE)
Department of English, Dibrugarh University
Assam, India

Abstract

It is a human instinct that powerful always tries to being in power dominating the weak and vulnerable. But it is also true that when there is power, there is always a resistance similar to Newton's Law of Motion. When a social system is stratified based on the principles of caste, religion, gender, race, among others; then the concepts like centre and margin or superiority and subalternity come to the discussion. Arundhati Roy as a writer is more interested to explore the unexplored or the dark side of human and societal sagas and tries to articulate the unarticulated stories. This conflicting relation between the rich and the poor gets reflected in both of her fiction and non-fiction. Her latest novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) is also loaded with the issues related to subaltern sections as she represents the contemporary Indian society from the viewpoint of marginalized or subaltern. All the central characters of the novel are drawn from the peripheries of the society. They are castaways in one way or the other, be it the cause of female, transgender, caste, class, or tribal people and so on. At the end of the novel, all the subaltern characters unite under one roof and together they create their own space challenging the central or mainstream society. This research paper seeks to explore the subaltern characters and their trials and tribulations to survive in a society which is run by the rich and powerful.

Key Words: Arundhati Roy, Subaltern, Caste Subaltern, Marginalization, *Hijra*.

Introduction

The term "subaltern" refers to the those people or group who are inferior in rank and status on the basis of race, class, caste, gender, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation among others. It is a state or condition that does not have any voice or agency in the social structure. Thus, subalterns are at the margins of the society. The word, "subaltern" was first used by Italian Marxist historian and political activist Antonio Gramsci in his article "Notes on Italian History" which later appeared in his widely known book, *Prison Notesbooks* (1919-1935) to refer to any "low rank" person or group of people in a particular society suffering under the hegemonic domination of the ruling power. Subaltern Studies as a critical branch of study started aiming to re-read the colonial historiography against the grain and it gradually entered to the domain of postcolonial critique. Under the leadership of Ranajit Guha, historians like Sahid Amin, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Partha Chatterjee, David Arnold, David Hardiman, Gyanendra Pandey and others formed a distinctive group called Subaltern Studies Group in 1979-80. Its primary aim was, as defined by Guha "to promote a systematic and informed discussion of subaltern themes in South Asian Studies" and thus "to rectify elitist bias characteristic of much research and academic

work” (Guha vii). The term “subaltern” attained much eminence and significance with the publication of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s notable essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988).

Literature can be used as a tool of empowering the weak, suppressed and marginalized sections of the society. It is desirable on the part of the writers to portray the social realities through their writings. There are many Indian writers who have focused on the issues related to subaltern in their writings. Among them, first we have to mention the name of the great troika of Indian English literature – Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan who were influential in highlighting the subaltern issues depicting the Indian society and culture realistically in their novels. Among the postcolonial novelists, Mahesweta Devi, Amitav Ghosh, Rohinton Mistry, Arundhati Roy, Arvind Adiga, Kiran Desai etc. are some prominent figures who emphasize the issues related to subalternity. Arundhati Roy as a writer is daring in unpacking meticulously the hidden truth of exploitation and inequalities happening in and around the society. Not only as a writer, but as an activist too, Roy always stands with/for the marginalized sections and raises her voice against the injustice and social inequalities meted to the latter. Arundhati Roy’s representation of subaltern sections in her novels is realistic as she places the marginalized characters at the center of the story. Similar to her Booker winning debut, *The God of Small Things* (1997) which is embroiled with the issues of caste subaltern, Arundhati Roy’s second novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), published after the two decades of her first novel, depicts the contemporary Indian society from the point of view of the marginalized or the subaltern. It portrays a story with multiple plots interweaving one another and populated with characters. All the central characters of the novel are drawn from the peripheries of the society, either they are oppressed or castaways as they are untouchables, *hijras*, protesters, insurgents, *adivasis* or ethnic minorities etc. However, at the end of the novel, all the subaltern characters have integrated under one roof and together they create an alternative of the *Duniya* (mainstream society), going beyond the barriers of caste, class, religion, gender etc.

Aims and Objectives

The paper makes an attempt to study the characters in the novel that are marginalized or subaltern in terms of caste, class, gender, religion, tribes among others. It will also explore whether the characters have the voice or agency to resist against their oppression and sufferings.

Research Methodology

This paper follows analytical and descriptive methods. The required information of this paper is collected from both primary and secondary sources of data. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* by Arundhati Roy is the primary source whereas the secondary sources comprise of theoretical discourses, research articles and edited books.

Analysis

All the central characters of the novel belong to the margins of the society – Anjum, Saddam, Tilo, Musa, Revathy, Azad Bhartiya etc. who are subalterns in a way or the other, may be it because of female, transgender, caste, class, or tribal people and so on. In the novel, the notion of subalternity can be traced on the level of caste, class, gender, religion, race, ethnicity etc. In the context of caste, Saddam’s characterization needs discussion. Saddam Hussain is an adopted name of a character called Dayachand who belonged to the family of *Chamars* or skimmers lived in a village named Badshahpur in the state of Haryana. Chamars is one of the

untouchable communities, whose occupation is collecting the carcasses of cow, skinning them and turning hides into leather. Their people are ordered by the upper caste people to collect the carcasses when cows die because they believe that if they touch the corpse, they would be polluted. As untouchable, the *chamar* community is considered as outsider of the mainstream society. Saddam experienced the cruel and inhuman treatment generally inflicted to the people of his community from his very childhood. The most traumatic incident witnessed by Saddam in his childhood is the lynching of his father by a group of frantic, orthodox Hindu fundamentalists under the false blame of “cow slaughter”. It was instigated by the fraud police officer called Sehrawat of Dulina police station due to the Saddam’s father’s inability to give him bribe. Misusing his power, Sehrawat arrested Saddam’s father along with his three friends and spread the rumour that they were cow killer which provoked the mob of blind religious followers who were participating in *Dussehra* to kill Saddam’s father ruthlessly in the name of “Cow Protection Law”. Such laws are pretexts for the dominant to perpetuate their authority against subalterns like Dayachand, whose subalternity stems from their “lower caste” – a position which is permanently fixed without any hope for social mobility or caste mobility. After this incident Saddam left his village for Delhi and took the vow to take revenge on Sehrawat which became his sole purpose in life. In Delhi, Dayachand adopted a new name, Saddam Hussain which is a little emblematic. When Dayachand was asked the reason behind taking the name of Saddam Hussain who stands as a symbol of a dictator, he replied that he was fascinated by the indomitable spirit of the President of Iraq when he first watched the video of his execution. He wanted to possess the indomitable spirit and courage of Saddam Hussain. There may be some other underlying reasons behind the adoption of this new name. It can be seen as Dayachand’s attempt to hide his real identity as a lower caste *chamar*. Perhaps, he wanted to be free from the clutches of Hindu caste system.

Wearing of sunglasses by Saddam may also bear a symbolic meaning. Perhaps, it may imply his denial to disclose his real identity by not keeping eye-contact with people. Another instance of the practice of untouchability is seen in the novel when Saddam worked in the mortuary. There, he witnessed that the Hindu doctors who were required to conduct the task of postmortems, passed the task to the sweepers and cleaners who belonged to the category of untouchables as it is stated in the novel:

The doctors, like most Hindus, looked down on them and considered them to be untouchables. The doctors would stand at a distance with handkerchiefs making their noses and shouts instructions to the stuff . . . (Roy 73)

It is an example of the deep-rooted untouchability practiced in the Indian society that even those belonging to the medical sciences, expected to be one of the most scientific, rational disciplines, cannot free from the orthodox mentality.

Untouchability is strongly embedded in Hinduism. In the name of religion, caste discrimination is practiced stringently. By bringing the issue of untouchability, the novel seems to question and challenge its legitimacy in the structure of social hierarchy. Such a rational character appears in the novel is Dr. Azad Bhartiya who questions the legitimacy of Hindu caste system. Dr. Azad Bhartiya is also an adopted name as well as symbolic too. The Hindi words, “Azad” means freedom, whereas “Bhartiya” stands for a Indian. Renouncing all his hereditary

identities like caste, class, religion, Dr. Bhartiya prefers to identify himself as a “free indian”. In utter contempt of Hindu caste system, Dr. Bhartiya says in the novel:

What caste am I? That is your question? With such a huge political agenda as mine, you tell me, what caste should I be? What caste were Jesus and Gautam Buddha? What caste was Marx? What caste was Prophet Mohammed? Only Hindus have this caste, this inequality contained in their scriptures. I am everything except a Hindu. (Roy 129)

Another instance of severer caste discrimination is faced by the character called S. Murugesan, who worked as a sepoy at Indian army. Sepoy Murugesan died as a martyr in an encounter between Indian army and insurgents. To honour for his brave dead, Indian government established a statue in his birthplace. Unfortunately, just because he belonged to a lower caste community, the people of his village were reluctant to give him honour as it is stated in the novel that “not everyone in the village was happy with idea of having an Untouchable man’s statue put up at the entrance” (Roy 319) and they gradually started spoiling the statue. This is an example of extreme disregard of the cast-ridden villagers who do not have the minimum respect for a martyr as they are not yet free from castiest mentality.

On the basis of gender norms, society creates discrimination among people. Through the characters of Anjum, a transgendered *hijra*, the novel brings the issue of gender subalternity. Anjum was born as a hermaphrodite whose birth name was Aftab given by his parents. As Aftab grew older, he inclined towards the feminine tendencies making his parents confused and panic. Indian society seems to be highly patriarchal which believes heterosexual norms of gender identity as the only normative mode of being. It gives space for binary construction of gender identities – either masculine or feminine and male or female. This heterosexual norm constantly pushes the non-heterosexual gender identities which fall under the category of LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) to the marginal position making them “deviant”, “queer” or “unnatural”. Thus the category of transgender people or *hijras* (a Hindi word used in South Asian countries to refer to the eunuch) has no space in the Indian society. Although Indian Government legally acknowledges the Third Gender (LGBT Community), still people are far away to accept them as “normal” human being. In the novel, through the sufferings and hardships of Anjum, their struggle of life is being highlighted. Anjum is told by the people that a *hijra* is “a living creature that is incapable of happiness . . .” (Roy 3) Under the dominant pressure of heterosexual norm, Anjum’s parents were conditioned to believe that giving birth to a hermaphrodite was the most unfortunate in their part or it was similar to a curse for them. So, they tried every possible ways to make their child (Aftab) a boy, a man or the inheritor of their family. To inculcate manliness in Aftab, his father adopted cultural projects by telling the stories of great warriors and their valor. His father even gathered money by every possible means; by cutting down household expenses and borrowing from the relatives for the medical surgery of Aftab. But all the attempts of his parents proved to be failure as soon as he joined to the *hijra* community and transformed him into an affectionate and glamorous “woman” by undergoing gender surgery removing his male genitalia. Indeed, in search of freedom and identity, Anjum enters the world of “Khwabgah”, a kind of dormitory for old Delhi *hijra*. The world of Khwabgah, the house of dreams, despite its chaotic atmosphere, provides a sense of belongingness to its inhabitants which the real world, *Duniya* (as mentioned in the novel), can never give Anjum as ze states in the novel that it “was the only place in this world where he felt

the air made way for him” (Roy 19). Thus, the world of khwabgah stands as an alternative space to the *hijras* who are always relegated to the margins by the mainstream society.

During colonial period, all the natives were subalterns, but postcolonialism creates its own subaltern. Women, lower class and caste, ethnic minorities etc. are rapidly turned into subaltern in postcolonial nation states. Postcolonial subalternization also involves the insurgent communists. The novel shows how the state power dominates the ethnic people of India. Through the character of Revathy, the novel brings the issue of Maoist-Naxalite insurgency in India which is an ongoing conflict between Naxalites and Indian state. The Naxalites are fighting for their land rights and the equal distribution of agricultural lands among the farmers. Revathy in the novel was a Telegu woman who actively participated in the Naxalite movement aiming to create a classless society. Revathy and her comrades are banned as underground people by the government. Whenever police encounter the insurgents, the brutalities and atrocities inflicted to them – hundreds of party workers were killed in inhuman ways, ripping stomachs, gouging out eyes, rapping the women and so on. Revathy was raped by the six policemen. She was not killed but tortured pitilessly. Still, her spirit could never be broken. She worked for the party till her very last breath. In the character of Revathy, we find the spark of resistance against the dominant state power. In the novel, there are frequent references to the rising of Indian state power to the point of totalitarianism as it fails at times to maintain its true spirit of democracy, secularism, socialism and integrity.

The large part of the novel revolves around the romance of Tilo and Musa, both of whom bear revolutionary spirits. Tilo or Tilottama, an architect who hails from the Kerala, brought up as a foster child of a lady teacher, Maryam Ipe. Tilo is forced to live a double-life due to her birth history which is as enigmatic to her as to others. There was a rumour regarding her birth history that her foster mother is also her real mother as Tilo was born as a result of the love-affair between her mother and a dalit man which was maintained unrevealed by her mother in the fear of societal norm. Thus Tilo has to lead an enigmatic life without any birth history still she is independent and strong enough that she can overcome all the fears and barriers that come in her path without the helping hands of others. At the end of the novel, all the characters that are oppressed and marginalized in one way or the other combine under one roof, i.e. the graveyard guest house “Jannat”, a dormitory for all those who are castaways. It is self-sufficient as it has all those that the mainstream society has – a people’s school, a people’s pool, people’s zoo and it is after all, beyond the rules of caste, class, religion and gender. Thus, the space that the subaltern characters together create at the end of the novel challenges the mainstream society and its paradigm.

Conclusion

From the above analysis, it can be said that subalterization on the basis of class, caste, gender, religion, ethnicities and other categories is nothing more than a strategy of the dominant group so that they can maintain and consolidate their powerful position. The dominant groups in the society always impose their power over the subservient groups. Postcolonialism refers to the resistance against any kind of dominance. The whole discourse of postcolonial theory is to be regarded as a speaking for voiceless and marginalized group. In the novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Roy challenges the strict barriers of society that divides people through her satiric commentaries. The characters, although suppressed, attempts to resist in their own ways. Saddam

Hussain resists through renouncing his dalit identity by adopting a Muslim name, whereas Anjum's resistance can be seen in the way she is able to create her own world, The Jannat Guest House as an alternative to the *Duniya*, the real world. Similarly, Revathy fights for classless society, containing the rebel spirit till her death. Moreover, the character, Dr. Azad Bharatiya can be seen as the mouthpiece of the novelist herself. Thus, the subaltern characters in the novel despite their oppression and sufferings in different ways, do attempt to raise voice against the dominant power.

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