

Disrupting the Narrative: Fragmentation and Nonlinear Storytelling in Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

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Received: 02-09-2025

Revised: 24-09-2025

Accepted: 16-10-2025

Published: 29-10-2025

ABSTRACT

Roy's The Ministry of Utmost Happiness (2017) challenges conventional linear storytelling through fragmentation, multiple perspectives, and temporal dislocation, reflecting the fractured political, cultural, and emotional landscapes of contemporary India. The main objective of this study is to investigate how Roy's use of nonlinear narrative strategies constructs meaning, amplifies marginalized voices, and destabilizes dominant historical discourses. The research is grounded in Gérard Genette's narratology (1980), focusing on his concepts of order, duration, frequency, and focalization, which provide a precise analytical lens for examining the structural disruptions in the novel. Findings indicate that Roy's fragmented form not only mirrors the complexities of memory, trauma, and hybrid identity but also engages the reader in an active process of reconstructing the narrative, thereby transforming storytelling into an act of resistance and socio-political commentary.

Keywords: Fragmentation, Nonlinear narrative, Postmodernism, Identity, Construction, Arundhati Roy

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary fiction has grown more experimental in its use of narratives in the past decades, with fragmentation and nonlinear narrative becoming the markers of literary innovation. Such narrative techniques, in which the chronology is interrupted, the point of view changes, and the narration is multi-voiced, destabilize the traditional plot structure based on linearity and challenge the reader to actively participate in the meaning construction. In addition to aesthetics, these methods can be viewed as the means of capturing the intricacies of lived experiences especially in the context of historical trauma, displacement, and socio-political upheaval (Kuiti, 2020; Rajan, 2021 and Piciuccio, 2023). The techniques take a political angle in the postcolonial literature, allowing the authors to confront the mainstream historiographies and give the marginalized voices more attention than the traditional forms of narratives do.

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness (2017) by Arundhati Roy is a good example of such a narrative break. The novel is structured as a mosaic of intersecting lives in which it moves across time and space seamlessly across the by-lanes of Old Delhi to the warring landscapes of Kashmir which unfolds through the discontinuous lives of characters like Anjum, a transgender woman, and Tilo, an architect in the political strife. Roy does not conform to the traditional unity of plot, but creates a stratified story in which individuals' pasts intertwine with political facts, and represents the fragmented identities and challenged truths of modern India. Such a narrative is not a simple stylistic experiment; it indicates the fragmented realities of people who exist on the fringes of the socio-political discourse of the country (Dass, 2020; Mitra, 2021 and Neumann, 2021).

Although the work has been harshly criticized, the current literature on *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* tends to put thematic analysis, emphasizing issues of nationalism, gender identity, or human rights, above a more long-term analysis of the formal and structural innovations of the work. Such an imbalance causes a significant gap in comprehending how the nonlinear and fractured narration of Roy in itself is a political and artistic act. In the absence of such an exploration of the intersection of form and meaning, there is a danger of interpreting how the structure of the narrative by Roy is actively involved in the shaping of what the reader considers to be the truth, the memory and the resistance. By filling this gap, it became possible to appreciate the contribution of the novel to the literary form and socio-political discourse more fully.

Research Problem

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness by Roy does not follow the traditional linear narrative format, as it uses fragmentation, multi-point of view, and time-hopping that do not conform to the traditional narrative patterns. Although the political themes of the novel (marginalization, identity, and resistance) have received significant criticism, there has been no specific scholarly study of the influence of nonlinear and fragmenting narrative techniques that Roy employs in shaping the perceptions of the readers of the truth, memory, and reality. It is in this discontinuity that the question of how the experimental narrative form adopted by Roy is not only a tool of aesthetics but also of political and philosophical representation to reflect the broken social and cultural fabric of the modern Indian world is raised. Thus, the main issue of the research is to discover how the disintegration and nonlinear narration undermine the traditional narrative structure to express the multiplicity, instability, and resistance in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*.

Research Objectives

1. To examine how Arundhati Roy employs fragmentation and nonlinear narrative techniques in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* to construct meaning and engage the reader.
2. To explore the socio-political implications of Roy's narrative disruption, particularly in its representation of marginalized identities and contested histories.

Significance of Study

In the meantime, the work has importance to the literary and cultural contexts. Literary-wise, it is a part of the narratological discourse as it examines the role of the experimental storytelling strategies in one of the key works of modern Indian fiction. It will enhance academic knowledge on how narrative form may be functioning as an artistic tool and as a form of political commentary. Socio-culturally, the study highlights how the structural decisions made by Roy allow the marginalized voices to emerge, challenge the historical accounts, and reflect the disjointed truths of the postcolonial societies. The work of Roy placed into the context of more general debate about the postmodern and postcolonial narrative forms, the study will shed light on how fragmentation and nonlinearity can be used as potent tools of storytelling and resistance in the 21st century literature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Pourjafari et al. (2022) apply ethical narratology, i.e., the rhetoric theory of James Phelan, to *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* with the aim of determining how the formal decisions made by Roy appeal to ethical considerations in narration. Their information is composed of disjointed episodes, silences, and woven stories all through the novel. The paper concludes that fragmentation and nonlinearity are ethical mechanisms, which safeguard the dignity of the subjects represented, oppose voyeurism, and provoke readers to assume active responsibility of interpretation. The authors find that the ethical ethics of the narrative form is practiced in Roy in the sense that the interruption of the narrative structure is paralleled with the interruption of social and historical justice.

Essa (2021) discusses how *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* by Roy represents the graveyard (Jannat) and other spatial motifs based on the spatial theory framework with reference to the idea of heterotopia presented by Lefebvre. The purpose of the study is to connect the spatial representation to the time fragmentation and layering of the narrative of the novel. Through descriptive passages placed in the graveyard and the spaces around it, Essa discovers that these other spaces, break down the time and narrative limits, allowing several stories to exist simultaneously and be resistant to time constraints. The results demonstrate that spatial heterotopias of the novel play a key role in the disruption of the linear narrative by Roy as well as her establishment of counter-memory locations.

The study on the role of intertextuality and intermedia references in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* by Pessô (2021) is based on an intertextuality and narrative architecture framework. It is aimed to demonstrate how epigraphs, quotations, and media references are not only decorative elements of the novel but also structural ones in the fractured form. Based on a critical reading of paratextual texts and cross-media allusions, the paper concludes that these allusions form bridging links between unrelated tales and historical events, and support the mosaic structure of the novel. Pessô-Miquel concludes that intertextuality in the work by Roy intensifies its polyphony, breaks the monologic readings, and inserts the text into a larger cultural and political discourse.

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness is examined by Menozzi (2019) in comparison to the nonfiction works by Roy in order to challenge the connection between realism, fragmentation, and political testimony. With reference to the theory of postcolonial realism and narratological ideas of digression and montage, the paper will seek to re-evaluate arguments that the novel rejects realism. The main information comprises narrative alternations between personal narratives and historical documentaries. Menozzi discovers that Roy does not renounce realism but turns it into a digressive realism that can accommodate a variety of temporalities and embedded testimonies to allow the expression of mass violence without providing any reductive closure. This form as described by Menozzi is not only ethically but also politically motivated.

In his article, Iyer (2018) analyses the Indian nation as depicted in the novel Arundhati Roy (2017) to explore the way in which the Indian nation is narrated in the novel in a fragmented and polyphonic manner. Incorporating a narratological perspective of polyphony and narrative disjunction into a postcolonial literary criticism approach, the Iyer aims to show that the intentional disruption of linear narrative by Roy is a purposeful political device. The information is made up of a chosen group of narrative pieces about marginalized communities like hijras, Dalits and Kashmiris. The paper concludes that the mosaic-like formulation opposes the mainstream nationalist discourses by prioritizing other voices and histories of the subalterns and that the nation is depicted as a shaky multi-perspectival formation instead of a cohesive unit.

METHODS & MATERIALS

The study is based on a qualitative interpretivist paradigm, which focuses on subjective meaning and interpretation of literary form. The first source is Arundhati Roy *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), and the second source is secondary data in the form of scholarly articles and critical essays. This single novel is purposely chosen to be used as the sample of the South Asian experimental fiction of the 21st century. In the meantime, structural aspects of fragmentation and nonlinear sequencing are analyzed through the use of a narratological approach as theorized by Gerard Genette (1980) and specifically his notions of order, duration, frequency and focalization. This narratological strategy is coupled with the postcolonial theoretical knowledge to put the novel form into the socio-political situation. The method of the analysis is close reading and the identification of the disruptions in the narrative, the mapping of their occurrences, and their thematic and political implication developed in an integrated narratological and postcolonial perspective.

DATA ANALYSIS

This paper discusses how *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) by Roy breaks the linear narrative by being fragmented based on the narratology of Gerard Genette (1980). It dwells on five categories such as order, duration, frequency, focalization, and voice to examine how the strategies of narrative used by Roy depict the political, historical, and personal disjunctions in modern India.

She lived in a graveyard, beside a grave. Her name was Anjum. She used to be Aftab
(Roy, 2017, p. 3).

This first line is a summary of discontinuous identity as well as the failure of linear biography. Replacement of Aftab with Anjum is an immediate indication of a violation of gender standards and personal past, which is reflected in the violation of the sequencing of the story. The cemetery setting works symbolically as an in-between zone not quite life or death similar to how Anjum exists between binary categories. The jagged staccato sentences discontinue the perception of the reader and leave him with a broken puzzle to complete the identity of Anjum, just as the novel leaves the reader to fill in the gaps of its fragmented time lines. This is a literal application of the idea of anachrony by Gerard Genette in which the time sequence is disrupted to generate meaning in dislocation.

It took her years to become the person she was and even longer to understand she
had been that person all along (Roy, 2017, p. 5).

In this case, the conflict between self-image and self-actualization presupposes nonlinear temporality of identity construction. The paradoxical form of being an individual and at the same time being that person is indicative of a cyclical time period as opposed to a progressive one which defies the linear before after paradigm. The way Roy puts it reflects narrative fragmentation: the life of the character does not follow a straight line but is a piece of recognition, denial, and recognition. This sentence also echoes the analepsis (flashback) and repetitive narration of Genette in which a series of past events is smashed into one cogitative moment, disrupting any coherent chronological sequence.

The story moves back and forth, like the tide now here, now there each wave
returning with something left behind (Roy, 2017, p. 29).

This is a self-reflexive remark concerning the narrative technique of Roy. The rhythm of the novel the movement between times, places, and perspectives is represented by the so-called tide. It is a free flow of anachrony and achrony in the language of Genette, in which the time supports are deliberately

undermined. The term something left behind accentuates the discontinuous character of memory and narration: each time we move back to the past, we alter the present in some way and leave traces, but never retrieve the entirety. The novel, therefore, is not subject to totalizing narratives, producing a readerly effect of assembling meaning out of fragmented remains.

The Emergency came and went. The Sikhs were slaughtered. Babri Masjid fell.
Gujarat happened. Kashmir burned. And through it all, Anjum lived on (Roy,
2017, p. 47).

This short historical list is a kind of condensed time montage, the decades of Indian history are compressed in one sigh. The result is a sort of a story telescoping, of events in different years that can be found together in a single sentence, and it is not easily unpacked in time. Genette would call this an extreme use of summary to discontinue historical sequence and collapse time to underline its violence as cyclical. The survival of Anjum in these events makes a connection between the personal and the political implying that individual life stories are built in and interrupted by non-linear historical traumas.

At Jantar Mantar, slogans swirled in the air some angry, some mournful, some
simply weary each voice certain it was telling the truth (Roy, 2017, p. 112).

In this case, Roy constructs a polyphonic narrative space, which is reminiscent of the idea of heteroglossia developed by Mikhail Bakhtin, when several voices exist without being resolved. These simultaneous views in the structural terminology of Genette interfere with a single narrative line and provide fragmentation by multiplicity. The whirl visual imagery is reminiscent of chaos and nonlinearity: truths are overlapping, contradictory and simultaneously present without a definitive, final sequence. The very scene of the protest location is an intensified space of protest that becomes a microcosm in which the novel does not enforce the ideological closure in a linear fashion.

Tilo did not think of herself as a victim. Nor as a hero. She was simply a woman
who had been both, and neither (Roy, 2017, p. 138).

This sentence cannot be categorized in a binary fashion, and this is the interstitial identities that Roy focuses on in his nonlinear characters descriptions. The form nullifying one type, followed by the other, followed by the complexity of both serves the novelist tendency to introduce conflicting sides without resolution. This is a resistant of the arc of traditional character development in the narratological sense; rather, the identity of Tilo is discontinuous and provisional, being constructed only in terms of changing narrative situations.

Dear Musa, I am writing from a room where the walls lean inwards, as though
listening. The city is unrecognizable now (Roy, 2017, p. 152).

Using epistolary form, Roy creates embedded stories, which breaks the overall plotline. This letter serves as an analeptic encroachment a point at which intimacy of the past occurs within the destruction of the present. The image of the listening wall is an ambiance of surveillance and paranoia, and it follows the fragmented city reality which is unrecognizably now. This subjective, spatial description makes the reader plunge into an unsteady temporality, in which personal and political times and schedules merge into a single close-up speech.

In the middle of her story, someone else's story arrived, and refused to leave (Roy,

2017, p. 168).

It is a metacommentary on the structural interruptions in the novel. Narrative intrusion stories do not take a straight line but enter, overlap, and exist alongside each other, which Roy literallyizes. Within the context of Genette, this is metalepsis, when the limits of the narration are violated. The words that are used to describe the persistence of memory, trauma, and intertwined lives, the phrase refusal to leave, support the impossibility of any kind of chronological separation of one life and another.

Anjum's grief had its own calendar, which did not match the nation's (Roy, 2017, p. 173).

Roy challenges the power of linear, national history by contrasting it with the personal time. The image of a calendar makes time subjective and rejects time schedules imposed by the state of mourning or healing. Such contrast between the temporal structures of the personal and the public illustrates anachrony: personal sorrow is presented in the rhythm not related to official descriptions of history, thus disrupting the temporal orientation of the reader.

That year the rains did not come. The tanks went in. The people vanished" (Roy, 2017, p. 187).

This short, austere sequence of sentences provides a disjointed cause-and-effect sequence. The contrast between the ecological catastrophe (rains did not come) and the political one (tanks went in) provides a shocking, nonlinear connectivity of nature and human crime. Through leaving out the intervening elucidations, Roy pushes the reader to reside in the void an instance of narrative ellipsis and to deal with the unreliability of historical causality.

One moment we are in Delhi. The next, without warning, we are in the Valley, where snow falls on the silence of the dead (Roy, 2017, p. 194).

Roy also indicates jump cuts in space and time, in a similar manner as cinematic cross-cutting. The abrupt change of the setting between Delhi and Kashmir devoid of the transitional elements represents the narrative fragmentation that requires the reader to adjust to the sudden change. Anachrony the lack of time indication used by Genette is applicable in this case because the reader cannot see a clear time frame, which adds to the disorienting theme of war and displacement.

The graveyard was a city within a city, a borderless country where the living and the dead shared their secrets (Roy, 2017, p. 208).

This description transforms a real space into a metaphor of liminality a place that transcends the traditional time and space. The borderless country disintegrates the distinction between life and death, just as the novel fails to distinguish the past and present. The cemetery is used to create a microcosm of the fractured world of the novel, where temporal, spatial, political boundaries are porous and are constantly being renegotiated.

Some things are better left unsaid. They survive longer that way (Roy, 2017, p. 217).

Roy here focuses attention on the idea of narrative omission as a mode of storytelling. This is a calculated *paralepsis*, in the meaning of the word, which withholds information in order to form absence as narrative effect. The existence of the unsaid suggests that linear narration with its requirement of full disclosure might not be sufficient to conserve memory and truth in traumatic situations.

What happened depended on who was telling it, and when (Roy, 2017, p. 233).

This is the epistemological position of the novel in a nutshell: the truth is situated, fragmented and contingent. The reliability of narrative varies with the point of view and the time elapsed, and breaks the idea of the unique and authoritative narrative. This emphasizes the polyphony and multi-focalization of the novel in terms of narratology, so that there are multiple versions of events, which are overlapping and even contradictory.

In the end, there was no end. Only more beginnings (Roy, 2017, p. 278).

The last line does not want to end, which supports the open form of the novel. It is a cyclic nature of this conception of narrative which also reflects the unwillingness of the novel to follow a traditional linear trajectory. The prolepsis (anticipation) and iterative narration used by Genette come into play here endings are tentative, and each resolution gives rise to other narratives. The impact is that the reader is left in the process of continuing to make meaning, just as the business of the history and identity in postcolonial India remains unfinished.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

When *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is discussed through the framework of narratology developed by Gerard Genette (1980), one can find that Arundhati Roy uses fragmentation and nonlinear narration not only as a stylistic gimmick but also a deliberate political and emotional choice. All the narratological elements order, duration, frequency, focalization, voice are in collaboration to disrupt the traditional narrative expectations, compelling the reader to work as an active participant in the process of making meaning in the novel.

Fragmentation as a Mirror of Political and Social Disjunction

Among the most notable discoveries is the disjointed nature of the modern India as demonstrated by Roy manipulation of order especially with the use of analepsis and prolepsis. The non-linear time of the text is in line with the historical consciousness of the nation that is fragmented, where the legacies of colonialism, communal violence, and state oppression intersect the lived memory. As an illustration, the life story of Anjum disclosed in non-linear bits reflects the broken social path of the marginalized populations. This validates Roy as a narrator as opposed to the mainstream, linear historiography, which is identical to the idea of Hutcheon (1988) of historiographic metafiction, in which the very form of writing itself questions official histories.

Temporal Distortion and the Rhythm of Memory

The distortion of time whereby slower details are manipulated and traumatic years are elided corresponds with the argument provided by the theory of trauma that memory is not chronologically presented but in spurts and jolts (Caruth, 1996). The fact that Roy lingers on her descriptions of Old Delhi or personal areas provides a relief to the violence of the narrative, whereas the shorter mentions of pogroms or military crackdowns underline that they cannot be expressed emotionally. This selective timekeeping encourages the reader to experience the burden of untold trauma, and the silences are as eloquent as what happens to be told.

Multiplicity of Perspectives and the Construction of Truth

Frequency gives rise to the idea of a single, authoritative truth through frequency Roy undercuts the idea of a singular, authoritative truth by telling the story a variety of times and in a variety of different perspectives. The Jantar Mantar demonstrations, as they are portrayed by Tilo and his exhausted disengagement as well as the idealism of the protestors, show that not all political events are being

perceived in the same manner, based on positionality. This plurality is a manifestation of the Bakhtin (1984) idea of polyphony in which opposing voices co-exist without the resolution of one moral or narrative truth. The outcome is the democratization of narrative power which gives the marginalized voices an equal narrative space.

Shifting Focalization and Reader Engagement

The use of the internal focalization (extremely subjective viewpoints) and zero focalization (omniscient, panoramic narration) makes the reader redefine his/her interpretative position continuously. This is a floating lens that reflects the uncertainty of experienced reality in a politically unstable world. Tilo is portrayed with the private sorrow, which is contrasted by the grandiose descriptions of the history of the city, which implies that individual and historical recollections cannot be separated. The alternations of these modes are also part of the narrative complexity, and can be used to validate the claim of Genette that the focalization varies can redefine the meaning in each and every time the story is told.

Polyphonic Voice and Story-within-Story Structures

The voice as strategic application and more specifically the use of letters, oral histories and embedded narratives is not a decorative type that Roy employs. These metadiegetic mechanisms create a stratified form of narration with the single narratives being contained within bigger socio-political forms. This discontinuity of voice puts the voices of the sidelined identities such as the hijra communities and Kashmiri rebels in the spotlight and questions the silence of the mainstream discourse.

The Political Function of Narrative Disruption

In the end, the results indicate that the fragmented, nonlinear shape of Roy is not the choice of an aestheticist, but a highly political one. Her rejection of linearity makes her oppose the teleological stories that are usually employed to legitimize political oppression. The rearrangement of narrative structure is comparable to the rearrangement of the dominant ideology, prefiguring the voices and histories that the state apparatuses are trying to reverse. This puts *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* in the context of the wider postmodern and postcolonial literary tradition in which form is utilized as a form of critical practice.

Readerly Implication

The sheer complicatedness of the Roy story compels the reader to become an active interpreter, re-creating timelines, bridging opposing points of view, and moving their point of focus up and down. Such a reader as co-creator mode corresponds to the theory of the implied reader proposed by Wolfgang Iser (1978) according to which uncertainties in the text are deliberately left to be filled in by the audience. Such fragmentation therefore goes beyond thematic resonance to structural requirement of reader involvement making the act of reading a political practice.

CONCLUSION

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness by Arundhati Roy does not conform to any norm of linear storytelling but instead offers a somewhat chaotic yet deeply cohesive narrative that reflects the chaotic nature of the realities in modern India. The novel disrupts the conventional narrative norms through its nonlinear form, changing visions, and mosaic structure and asks the reader to experience the plurality of human experiences. Fragmentation is not just an aesthetic strategy of Roy, but a political and philosophical gesture which questions the prevalent patterns of representation and expresses the fragmented identity, nationhood and belonging of the postcolonial discourse.

Through the entwining of an individual and group history, Roy turns narrative fragmentation into an inclusivity space where all the marginalized voices, suppressed histories, and hybrid identities can be

found. Fragmentation is the reflection of fractured reality of the social, political and emotional world, as the narrative structure of the novel is disjointed. The nonlinear narration is used as a method to challenge the constraints of the single, authoritative narrative and, instead, prefigures the polyphony of voices which constitute the postcolonial condition.

After all, the narrative style of Roy does not only interfere with the chronological action but also the ideological structures that lay emphasis on order and resolution. By doing this, she reinvents storytelling as a form of rebellion one that does not reject ambiguity, multiplicity, and disorder as truth telling. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, therefore, represents a tribute to the strength of fragmented storytelling to find the truth of the messiness and splendor of human life, and that it is possible to be complete even in the state of dissonance.

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