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# Subalternization of the Indian Minorities: A Paracolonial Reading of The Ministry of Utmost Happiness

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper explores The Ministry of Utmost Happiness (2017) by Arundhati Roy by means of the overlapping theoretical approaches to subalternity and paracolonialism. The paper hypothesizes that even after the formal independence of India, structural hierarchies and epistemic violence of colonialism exist in new forms, i.e., economic, ideological, and cultural. The story by Roy does not just reveal the promises of the postcolonial freedom that were not fulfilled, but also reveals the way the Indian state has held on to the unfulfilled status of most of its people, such as Dalits, Muslims, transgender people, and the urban poor. By closely analyzing the text and providing some theoretical understanding of Gayatri Spivak, Antonio Gramsci, Ania Loomba, and Robert Young, this paper can theorize the Indian condition as being paracolonial, which is, under the governance of native elites, the perpetuation of colonial logic. The study shows how the novel, as authored by Roy, also serves as a political intervention to criticize the neoliberal state and redefine the subaltern spaces as the place of resistance and empathy, as well as collective hope.*

*Keywords: Subalternization, paracolonialism, postcolonial India, Arundhati Roy, marginalization, and neoliberalism.*

## INTRODUCTION

*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is a novel that cannot be put into generic and ideological boxes by Arundhati Roy. Roy turns back to fiction a couple of decades after *The God of Small Things* (1997) with a story that explores not just the social, political, and emotional realms of India. It is both a poem of fragmentation, a record of disapproval, and a song of mourning over the false principles of independence. Roy creates a literary space in which marginalized identities are struggling to create their presence in the homogenizing discourse of the nation-state: Dalits, Muslims, Hijras, Kashmiris, and the poor masses. India, after the colonization, in the fiction by Roy, is tormented by its colonial history. The novel reveals the way in which the logics of colonial domination, such as surveillance, exclusion, and hierarchy, still have been organizing daily life. In this respect, the political independence of India in 1947 did not indicate an epistemic break but a type of change in the power of foreign rulers to native elites. The postcolonial state has internalized and naturalized the bureaucratic institutions, education systems, and capitalist models that were put in place during the colonial era, thus creating what this paper has termed paracolonialism-a continuation of the colonial structures in the hands of the indigenous governments (Chandra, 2018; Loomba, 2015).

The story by Arundhati Roy is quite political in its structure and content. Her narration carries her out of the graveyards of Delhi to the occupied territories of Kashmir, into the small domains of gendered bodies, to the big horizons of national identity. The novel represents a patchwork of rebellion, with the subalterns

having a voice and an identity reclaimed by the subalterns. The question that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has brought to the forefront is known as Can the subaltern speak? (1988) is partly solved in the works of Roy, who is not only allowed to speak but also to redefine the grammar of nationhood.

This paper assumes Roy's The Ministry of Utmost Happiness is a paracolonial state, in which the Indian state continues to perpetuate colonial relationships by oppressing caste, supporting religious nationalism, and marginalizing gender and income inequality. It is an interdisciplinary study that combines Subaltern Studies as well as Paracolonial Theory and looks at how the Roy novel unravels the processes of subalternization in an otherwise supposed-to-be-postcolonial nation.

**Significance of the Study**

This research is important because it incorporates the Subaltern Studies and Paracolonial Theory to redefine the fiction by Roy in the wider context of postcolonial power. Even though the existing literature has explored Roy as a political activist and innovator of narratives, not many have read her work through the prism of paracolonialism, which can be described as the adherence to colonial epistemes even in the post-independence state. The work is therefore relevant to the current discussions in literary, cultural, and political theory in three significant ways. *Firstly*, is sheds light on the role of literature as a resistant and memory platform of subaltern voices. *Secondly*, it broadens the scope of paracolonial theory by incorporating the postcolonial theory as a critical instrument to explain the inequalities in the present. *Lastly*, it provides an interdisciplinary reading that connects the fiction of Roy to the experiences of the people who are marginalized in India.

**Objectives of the Study**

This study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To examine how subalternization takes place in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*.
2. To analyze the continuity of colonial dominance in post-independent India on a paracolonial approach.
3. To investigate how the characters of Roy are voices of the marginalized caste, religion, gender, and region.
4. To show how literature has been a place of resistance against paracolonial domination.

**Theoretical Framework**

The article uses an interdisciplinary approach that incorporates Subaltern Studies and Paracolonial Theory. The term evolved out of the idea of Antonio Gramsci, who proposed a definition of the subaltern classes, which was built up by the Subaltern Studies group, as well as by Gayatri Spivak, who notoriously posed the question: Can the subaltern speak? The voice of the subaltern, according to Spivak (1988), has been systematically suppressed by the dominant discourses, that is, both colonial and nationalistic discourses. The theory looks at how the voices of the marginalized people are represented, and are not allowed to represent themselves.

The word paracolonial is used in reference to the colonial ideologies, practices, and economic systems that remain evident in the postcolonial societies. It acknowledges that independence did not tear apart colonial relations of power, but one simply substituted foreign masters with local elites. Surveillance, bureaucracy, and the stratification of society remain the paracolonial state at work. Theorists like Ania Loomba (2015) and Robert Young (2001) explain the process of colonial paradigms internalization by the postcolonial countries to stay in charge. These frameworks have been combined to identify the manner in which The Ministry of Utmost Happiness portrays India as a paracolonial state that constantly subalternizes its own people.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Past criticism of Arundhati Roy has placed a lot of emphasis on her political interests and experiments with narration. Subaltern Studies was the name coined by the writings of the Subaltern Studies group, especially the writings by Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, and Dipesh Chakrabarty. They aimed at rewriting Indian history as seen by the marginalized classes that were not part of colonial and elite nationalist histories (Guha, 1982). Guha (1982) defined subaltern as the population disparity between the total Indians and the entire population of those whom we have defined as the elite. This distinction makes the subaltern the other of the discourses of colonialism and nationalism.

In her famous essay Can the Subaltern Speak (1988), Gayatri Spivak criticizes Western intellectual attempts to write about the subaltern, with the thesis that subaltern representational attempts are frequently silenced in themselves. The argument made by Spivak is essential to explain the tension in the novel of Roy between voice and representation. Anjum, Tilo, and other disempowered characters are not just characters; they represent an effort to allow the subaltern to speak in a manner that questions the hegemony. Nevertheless, despite this literary reclaiming that Roy tries to make, she is conscious of the ethical issues surrounding her position in representing the marginalized.

The narrative approach used by Roy complies with the admonition of Spivak against establishing essential identities of subalterns. The discontinuity, polyphony, and non-linearity found in the novel oppose the homogenization of the subaltern experiences. Instead of making a single subaltern consciousness, Roy performs a polyphonic discourse (Bakhtin, 1981), in which all the voices, including those of Anjum, Tilo, and Musa, can exist without a subsumption into a grand narrative.

Another essential dimension that explains the narrative strategies used by Roy can be found in the concept of hybridity and the third space as developed by Homi K. Bhabha (1994). To Bhabha, the colonial experience creates impromptu forms of identity that disrupt stable cultural positions. This hybrid space is turned into a negotiating and resisting place where new meanings are created. This hybridity is expressed by Roy through his characterization of Anjum, a transgender Hijra that inhabits the focal point between male and female, Muslim and Indian, living and dead. The fact that Anjum lives in a cemetery, called Jannat Guest House, makes the concept of the third space literalized by Bhabha, a place of contradiction, resistance, and transformation.

With this spatial allegory, Roy is confronting the dichotomies of center and periphery, colonizer and colonized, self and other. Postcolonial literature usually disrupts such binaries to expose the fluidity of identity, as Loomba (2015) seems to propose. In the text by Roy, the graveyard is the metaphor of the buried histories of India, the forgotten victims of state violence, caste oppression, and communal strife, who speak through the stifled land of the Indian conscience.

The views of Frantz Fanon on the psychological and structural violence of colonialism are still needed to comprehend the paracolonial state. In The Wretched of the Earth (1963), Fanon claims that decolonization is not necessarily the way to liberation; the postcolonial state tends to repeat the same repressive processes of its colonial predecessor. The extent to which Fanon critiques the world as a place where the violence of empire lives on in new forms supports the claims made by Roy when he describes India as the place where the violence of empire still prevails- whether it is military oppression in Kashmir, caste oppression in the Dalit communities, or bureaucratic oppression in the urban areas.

Although the context of Anjum and Musa differs, they both manifest Fanonian violence. The fact that Anjum is ostracized based on her gender identity and religion is similar to social alienation that Fanon explains as internalized colonialism, whereby marginalized subjects internalize their inferiority within the

nation. Likewise, the fight that Musa had to gain Kashmiri freedom is a case of coloniality of power (Quijano, 2000), whereby the state directs the challenging regions as colonial frontiers and not as part of the nation.

Pramod K. Nayar (2018) coined the paracolonialism term to further develop postcolonial criticism by putting emphasis on the way the former colonies perpetuate colonial ideologies in the nationalist governments. Nayar explains that paracolonialism implies the extension of colonial forms of domination to the governance, economy, and culture of post-independent countries. This also applies especially in the depiction of India as a paracolonial state by Roy, where surveillance, militarization, and caste hierarchies are institutionalized even nowadays.

It is in this narrative that Roy shows that the control structures have not been turned down by the independence, but only under new managers. The bureaucratic apathy and scuttlebutt of the police that manifest in every part of The Ministry of Utmost Happiness reflect the continuation of colonial rule with new types of legitimacy. This paracolonial fact eradicates the boundary between colonizer and country, unveiling the irony of liberty that generates slavery.

According to Banerjee (2020), the postcolonial state tends to incorporate the gaze of the colonizer and reverse it against its people. This self-colonization is manifested through how the state treats the minorities, dissenters, and the poor. The image of the disenfranchised provided by Roy resembles that of the subaltern afterlife: a state of being present in postcolonial modernity and yet not being visible in its discourse of progress.

The fragmented structure of the novel is also linked to historical amnesia, and another vital theoretical dimension is cultural memory. According to Aleida Assmann (2011), literature may be used as a sort of memory bank that holds repressed the past. The novel of Roy is like a museum that retrieves lost histories of struggle and mourning. The narratives of the characters, such as Anjum adopting a child, Tilo recording the state crimes, and Musa becoming disillusioned with revolution, are acts of remembering, acts of defiance against the official historiography.

On the one hand, Roy anticipates the memory of the subaltern, thereby selecting the provincializing Europe (also known as the process of decentralizing Western epistemologies and offering indigenous knowledge its own validation) (Chakrabarty, 2000). In this sense, The Ministry of Utmost Happiness may also be interpreted as a decolonialist literary project in which the peripheries reassert their ability to have a historical agency against the generalizing discourse of modernity.

**ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

In the Ministry of Utmost Happiness, Arundhati Roy turns the realm of space into the realm of ideological battles. The cemetery on which Anjum constructs the Jannat Guest House is a counter space to the conceived nation. Space is a social product, as Lefebvre (1991) believes, it is a product of power. The cemetery, which is the usual site of death, is reborn as a heterotopic society in which the dispossessed hijras, Dalits, street children, and beggars build a precarious utopia. Roy's re-spatialization of the country breaks the formal cartography of the nation-state, which reflects the concept of heterotopia by Foucault (1986), which are places that dispute any other space.

In this rethought Jannat, Roy dramatizes subaltern solidarity. The fact that Anjum takes the initiative to accommodate the rejected can be seen as the same idea as Fanon (1963), who feels that liberation should start with space and community. The Jannat Guest House opposes patriarchal and statist governments: a miniature in which death has become domesticated and the marginalized are visible. According to Nayar (2018), fictional geography by Roy maps the paracolonial extension of colonial boundaries in the social form and thus rewrites the bottom-top politics of space.

Anjum, who was born Aftab, is a transgender Muslim person, and she is at the crossroads of various forms of marginality, including gender non-conformity, a religious minority, and a low-class background. Her character questions the nationalist history of normative citizenship. In the same vein as Bhabha (1994), Anjum lives in the third space, neither male nor female, neither Muslim nor Hindu, neither an insider nor an outsider. Her biography dismantles the dichotomous reasoning of identity that supports the postcolonial nation.

The character of Anjum as described by Roy is not victimized or romanticized. By means of her fluctuating selfhood, Roy is performing what Spivak (1988) would describe as strategic essentialism--a provisional identification in order to be political with minimal bowing down to predetermined classification. Anjum and her pilgrimage to Ajmer Sharif, the next trauma she experiences following the Gujarat riots, and her eventual escapism to the graveyard are in line with the fractured journey of India towards modernity itself. The scene of the riot told with sensory overload and multiplicity of chaos reminds one of the Fanonian outburst of colonial violence in an allegedly independent polity.

Caretaking of the dead reveals how Anjum resists in a caring manner. According to Puar (2017), queer bodies are usually archives of violence and care, which carry collective memory. The act of nursing orphans left by the streets and the poor becomes literal when Anjum salvages the lives of the necropolitical systems (Mbemba, 2003). Her life, in this regard, speaks of the existence of an ethical community, which transcends state and gender dichotomies.

Provided that Anjum is embodied subalternity, Tilo is the intellectual conscience of opposition. Tilo is partially based on Roy himself as an activist, balancing on the privilege of education and the cost of learning about systematic injustice. The position of reconciliation and disobedience places her on the border of conformity and resistance in her relationship with Musa, a Kashmiri militant. The preservation of documents that Tilo does (letters, photos, testimonies) replicates the idea of cultural memory as resistance through Assmann (2011). In storing repressed stories, she converts her personal sorrow into a national document.

Roy uses Tilo to attack the conspiracy of the educated elite. The counter-insurgency discourse of the Indian state kills the humanness of the Kashmiri people; the compassion of Tilo is a way of returning the humanity. The fact that she chooses to lead a life of anonymity in the graveyard community of Anjum fails to draw a line between the activist and the subaltern, which implies that ethical solidarity needs to unlearn the privilege (Chakrabarty, 2000). The non-linear narrative of Roy, as he switches between Delhi and Kashmir, is the way of what Slemon (1990) calls the discourse of resistance because fragmentation becomes a political aesthetic form.

The Kashmiri rebel, Musa, fits the description of the native intellectual who becomes a revolutionary (Fanon, 1963). However, Roy complicates the trope by showing how a struggle aimed to revolutionize the whole world has absorbed colonial hierarchies. The disillusionment of Musa with the Indian state and militant leadership is an accentuation of the coloniality of power as proposed by Quijano (2000) to the unavailability of colonial epistemologies in anti-colonial movements. His desire for justice is caught in the stranglehold between nationalism, propaganda, and militant absolutism.

Kashmir is portrayed in the novel, which reflects the findings of Partha Chatterjee (1993) concerning the inner world of the postcolonial nation. The Kashmir occupation by the state replicates the colonial forms of governance: curfews, checkpoints, surveillance, and military show. Roy contrasts them with the moments of tenderness, letters of a wife of Musa, screams of mothers of the killed men, to make the war more human. The paracolonial state then seems to be both aggressor and victim of its own inherited violence.

Outside of religion and gender, Roy prefigures caste as another tool used against the subaltern. The character of Dayachand, a Dalit sanitation worker, as well as the allusions to the atrocities against the Dalits, ground the novel in the Indian structural inequity. According to Guru (2011), caste is the place where colonial modernity has been translated into the oppression of indigenous people most of all. The caste violence that still exists today, despite independence, demonstrates the paracolonial Indian democracy- polity which inherits the colonial taxonomy of purity and pollution.

The fact that Roy chooses to include the Dalit experiences in the bigger story of resistance is reminiscent of the Ambedkarite philosophy that views caste abolition as a kind of decolonization. Her language, a blend of English, Urdu, Hindi, and regional idioms, is not subject to linguistic elitism and forms what Mukherjee (2019) describes as vernacular cosmopolitanism. This hybridity in the language empowers the subaltern narrator to have a plural voice, to narrate in multiplicity, instead of singling out others in a homogenizing voice.

The broken design of The Ministry of Utmost Happiness is not only stylistic but also political in nature. In line with the idea of incredulity over metacisions as proposed by Lyotard (1984), the story of Roy is anti-closural. The novel is a shifting of documentary realism/poetic allegory, journalism, and myth. This hybridism disrupts the power of linear national history. Nayar (2019) understands the fragmentation of Roy as discontinuity as a narrative ethics of multiplicity, which reflects the lived life of subaltern lives: fragmented, interrupted, and usually muted. Opposing bureaucratic reports and close confessions, Roy unveils the elimination of human suffering by official discourse. Her style replicates what is in the archive: partial, inconsistent, but deeply real.

The image of India created by Roy is a dystopia and redemption at the same time. The paracolonial state is a paradox of its own: it is promoted as a democratic state, but at the same time, colonial discipline is propagated. The performance of military parades, the oratory of national oneness and oppression of dissent can be recalled to the supposed community of Anderson (1983), an imagined nation built by selective memory. Roy subverts this fantasy by putting the focus on the non-belongers: hijras, Dalits, Muslims, Kashmiris, and political prisoners. The work by Roy as a novel shows the intersection of the concept of necropolitics in the theory of Achille Mbemba (2003) when sovereignty is determined by the ability to decide who lives and who dies. The novel brings to light the machinery of paracolonial rule through death in the form of the unclaimed corpses in Kashmir, to infants dumped in Delhi. However, in the face of utter despair, Roy refuses to give up the chance of love, compassion, and mutual survival as the only means of resistance when more organized politics is lost.

## CONCLUSION

*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* by Arundhati Roy is a huge criticism of the incomplete decolonization of India. The novel breaks the illusion of postcolonial liberation through its multivocality and stratification of narration and reveals the colonial hierarchies in wave after wave. Although India is politically independent, it is still trapped in the paracolonial arrangement of caste oppression, gender marginalization, religious exclusion, and economic disparity. The persistent generation of voicelessness, which is the gist of the novel, is the subalternization concept. Subalternity is not discussed by Roy as a definite identity but as a dynamic process, which is repeatedly transformed by power. Her characters, Anjum, Tilo, Musa, and unknown multitudes, are a mirror of different aspects of subaltern life in which the survival of the individual is a protest. Providing such figures with narrative agency, Roy back to the moral and creative level that has been deprived of them by the discourse of the state and the elite.

The paracolonial prism throws light on the continued colonial logic through the post Indian independence government. Imperial forms of surveillance, classification, and control find their reflection through the bureaucratic and military apparatus of the Indian state. A continuity of domination is evident through the

treatment of Kashmir, the exclusion of Dalits and Muslims, as well as the commodification of the poor under neoliberal capitalism. India, as Roy understands it, is therefore a free country full of colonial ghosts. Chandra (2018) refers to that as a paracolonial state of being free and subjugated at the same time. Meanwhile, the story of Roy does not give up hope. She sees the potential they might have to be united as the marginalized, through the image of the graveyard community. It is the Jannat Guest House that becomes a heterotopic location in which new modes of belonging are created that are not necessarily based on the binaries of nation and non-nation, self and other. Love, care, storytelling are counter-politics - the instruments that make the state dehumanize, humanize. The novel implies that independence is not in the form of formal sovereignty but in the ability to listen, to witness, and to include.

In a more general theoretical perspective, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* can be considered a contribution to the dynamic discourse between postcolonialism and subaltern studies, which is furthered into the area of the paracolonial critique. The fiction of Roy lies between literature and activism and turns fiction into resistance. The way she transforms language, form, and character confronts the hegemony of colonial epistemes and creates room for other forms of modernities. Spivak (1988), who tells us that the subaltern cannot speak within those systems that do not allow them to speak, Roy responds by making the subaltern not merely talk but sing, cry, and recall. The bottom line is that Roy makes his novel a lament and a manifesto--a lamentation over a nation that has been betrayed and a manifesto of moral rebirth. It urges the readers to learn the unpleasant truth that the decolonization process is not a historical event; it is a struggle. As long as the voice of the marginalized is not heard in the consciousness of the nation, independence is not complete. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* by Roy, thus, turns out to be an act of literary decolonization- a decolonization that takes humanity back to the devastations of paracolonial authority.

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