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Political and Gender issues in Arundhati Roy's "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness"

Masalah Politik dan Gender dalam Arundhati Roy "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness"

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Abstract

Arundhati Rao is an acute observer of the very fabric of Indian society. He is an activist and social reformer for the marginal, downtrodden and a revolutionary spark for the 21st century litterateurs. The Ministry of Utmost Happiness is the second novel of Booker Prize-winning author Arundhati Roy which is published in 2017 after twenty years of the publication of his debut novel *The God of Small Things*. The novel recounts some of the egregious events of Contemporary Indian history such as land reform, 2002 Godhra train burning and Kashmir insurgency as well. It illustrates the sufferings, pain and the right of the LGBT community in contemporary India. The novel also incorporates many social and political events occurred in India and other parts of the world against the backdrop of its story. The paper argues upon the political and gender issues with the reference of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* by Arundhati Rao.

Introduction

Arundhati Roy is an amazing writer of this present era who possesses defiant and reformative voice. In comparison to other women writers, Roy is less moving in her books. Her plays include the harsh reality of life. Arundhati Roy never showcases any kind of hesitation to articulate or write on any kind of wrongful issue. As a writer, Roy has never been agog to draw up fairy tale, romance, or fantasy rather than unravelling the suffering of mankind. All her books outline religious, war, political, nationalism, capitalism and the plight of people in this hour of crisis. Arundhati Roy always try to create a healthy environment for the disadvantaged people. Roy raises questions on the patricentric society, social stigmas and the authority of political power. Her works are the reflection of her outrage, discontentment and compassion. Roy states in an interview with Kathy Arlyn Sokol [1].

[i] think that writers are always two people. I'm one person who lives my life and the other part of me watches me live my life, you know, and that part is the writer who is sort of detached from everything and watches. It doesn't make you live your own life less passionately, but there's a part of you that is sitting on the ceiling fan and watching it and smiling or whatever. In everything I do or have ever done in my life, I feel anger towards authority, and I'm even frightened of ever having a child because I don't want authority over that small person. It's very confusing for me and anyone who is involved with me. Because it's just this permanent questioning of every little thing, every sentence. I mean, it becomes a wall which is quite tiring sometimes. I suppose often these emotions are awakened in you through whatever you have been through in your childhood and nothing that happens to you as an adult ever quells those questions or those fears or that anger. It will always be there. And yet, I know, that if you were to speak to anybody who knows me, they will say, "Oh, she's so calm." And the fact is that I am very calm, but that is only in my day-to-day interaction, but I am not at all calm about major issues or major questions, you know. And that's not a sort of shouting kind of anger that I have, but a very cold anger [1].

Since ancient times the culture has been split into the weak and dominant, where vulnerable people are subjected to the dominance and flattery of society's authoritative class and hence become the perpetrators of paranoia. In society they have no name and life. Their identity is at stake, or they live with a decapitated uniqueness. They are the miserable species in this world who have no experience, thus are the perpetrators of deep lowliness and feel always terrified to be insulted. This study addresses transgender abuse and identity crisis at the root of the gender identity issue. Gender identity insinuates a person's identity due to the level of feminine or masculine characteristics in an adult that conforms to the traditional concept of society as a male or female. A person's gender identity is a psychological component of an individual's sexual orientation. In an article, "*Let Us to Live: Social Exclusion of Hijra Community*", Hijra (Eunuch) or Transgender has been identified by Sibsankar Mal [2] as "an umbrella term to signify individuals who defy rigid, binary gender constructions and who express or present a breaking and blurring of culturally prevalent stereotypically gender roles."

The Eunuchs are not in harmony with society's expectations. As they don't suit in this gender culture, they are stripped of their privileges with social structure. They exist in a male body with women's feelings. In this cliched community, they still face a question of identity crisis focused on the stereotypical relationship between men and women. They have no room for themselves and their families are also refused. Throughout society they are deprived of psychological, economic and political freedom. When they survive in the stereotype, they always have a longing for their name and a place for yourself. This paper also discusses discrimination against women in India. As Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak [3] stated, "If in the context of colonial production, subaltern has n history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow....".

Indian culture is a male dominant society in which women are slaves to male monopolies. They are the victims of discrimination against women and men. The plexus of male dominated society consists of stereotypes which support the superiority of men over women. Women are still the miserable dolls who move in alienation without their own identity. They stay in the male oppression surrounding, bearing the anxiety that masculine authority endorses. They are harassed and raped viciously, deprived of their rights and opportunities without their own identity. Women constantly attempt to express their suffering, but they are silent. Such discrimination against women not just stifle their voice in the society but takes them away from employment, economic freedom and equitable political participation. They are isolated from the public and national discourse and are never recognized for their effort as well. They struggle with a sense of uncertainty and experience the pain of bigotry and identity crisis.

This research paper also focused on the question of the national identity problem. Ernest Renan [4] opines:

"A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things which, properly speaking, are really one and the same constitute this soul, this spiritual principle. One is the past, the other is the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present consent, the desire to live together, the desire to continue to invest in the heritage that we have jointly received.... The nation, like the individual, is the outcome of a long past of efforts, sacrifices and devotions." [4]

Discussion

Indians face the national identity crisis in some of the places of the country. Though people are citizens and freedom are guaranteed by the Constitution, people still feel as if they reside in a foreign land. They could not align with the ethnically diverse society. Thus, they seek independence and isolation from their own country. They are in a bind because they do not know if they belong to India. This desire for recognition contributes to defiance and contempt.

The naturalized binary gender classification is critiqued in the novel through the life story of Anjum born as Aftab. Aftab was born as the son of Jahanara Begum and Mulaqat Ali in Khwabgah. The sexual identity of the child terrifies the mother and she does not unravel it even to her husband for some time. Both expected a baby boy but quite contrary to their conventional expectations it was neither a boy nor a girl. Jahanara Begum thought, "In Urdu, the only language she knew, all things-carpets, clothes, books, pens, and musical instruments -had a gender. Everything was either masculine or feminine, man or woman. Everything except her baby" [5]. She considered this as quite contradictory to live separate with language or conventional notions of life. Fausto Sterling expresses a similar idea when she states "European and American culture is deeply devoted to the idea that there are only two sexes. Even our language refuses other possibilities; . . . whether one falls into the category of man or woman matters in concrete ways" [6]. His father Mulaqat Ali attempts to help the child become "normal" desperately, but he finds that his child is unable to fit comfortably into one sex. Aftab, a Hijra or Kinnar was ridiculed by other children and they pointed out to his ambiguous identity both as male and a female, "a he and a she". Aftab finds himself physically and psychologically bothered because others expect him to fit into the conventional system. Aftab had a body which blurred the conventional borders of male and female. The story of Aftab divulges the problems of living in a society which is characterized by essentialist explanation of gender. The understanding of self in children begins with sex related categorization of the self as male or female. It is also found that certain types of behaviour are related to a sex and it is assumed to be stable. Such a distinction based on sex reinforces sexual inequalities according to feminist theorists. Gender variation according to the biologist Fausto Sterling [6] is normal. Her study based on the infants whose abstruse genitalia were surgically changed shows impossibility of confirming always to a binary gender structure. Biologists like Fausto believe that there are actually five sexes - male, female, Hermes (that is a hermaphrodite or persons with both an ovary and testes), Mermes (That is male hermaphrodites which are raised with testes and with certain features of women's genitals) and Ferms (this is the female hermaphrodite with ovaries in tandem with certain features of male genitals).

Aftab, a female trapped in a male body, embraces the identity of a woman and hopes to realize his/her true self. In Judith Butler's opinion we need not consider gender to be passively determined but "it is a process of constructing ourselves" [7]. Body is considered as a locus of dialectical process and in this process, what has been imprinted on the flesh gets a new set of historical interpretation. Aftab's transformation to Anjum is explicated as a passage into another world. She lives with other people, a heterogeneous community of hermaphrodites, which incorporates men who don't believe in surgery, Hindus, and Muslims. The dichotomy of the ordinary world, Duniya and the world of Hijra's is presented in a subtle manner. Anjum learns that the Hijra's were a chosen set of people who were endowed with the power to curse and bless. But the irony is that the very same chosen people bestowed with this power are confined to a peripheral existence. For Aftab initially, the transformation into Anjum is a mode of self-transcendence. But Anjum often reflects about the despicable condition of the Hijra's, and Kwabgah was the abode of such people like her. It is a place which liberated their souls from their bodies. Anjum's friend Kulsoom Bi recounts the history of Kwabgah and Hijra's and underlines the significant role played by the Hijra community in the great Hindu mythology and the Royal palace. They enjoyed a position and were respected and loved for their services to society too. Kulsoom remarks "To be present in history, even as nothing more than a chuckle, was a universe away from being written out of it altogether" (Roy 2017, 51). They have a tradition of being an integral part of and outside of the culture.

Kwabgah, the house of dreams, provides shelter and hope to many people like Anjum whom the rational world has ostracized. Anjum sought to escape from the borderland of the gender conflict within the self. It is not only Anjum in the novel, but characters as well have a border within the self and in the external world. She satisfies her urge as a half-woman when she takes up the role of a mother figure by raising Zainab, an abandoned kid from the street. Zainab grows with a lot of mothers like Anjum in an uncustodial way. Anjum through her transformations - from a boy, to neither being boy or girl physiologically, to a woman psychologically - tries to redefine her life. The duality of being neither a man nor a woman or being both a man and a woman lead Anjum into different territories of the world. Kwabgah is one such place where the Hijra's hope to liberate their "Holy Soul" trapped in their wrong bodies. Kwabgah is unlike the ordinary world and it is defined as "another world". Anjum refers to this world as Duniya, a world which for her is oblivious of the predicament of the Hijra's. Kwabgah is a world in itself; it is considered to be abode of "special people", or "blessed people" who "came with their dreams that could not be realized in the Duniya" (Roy 2017, 53).

Tilotama is another major character with indeterminate origins like Anjum. According to Arundhati Roy she would be the imaginary child of Ammu and Velutha in *The God of Small Things* which had their stories ended otherwise. She is conceived as an imaginary sibling of Estha and Rahel in other words. Anjum and Tilotama are polar opposites and mutually exclusive in their nature and actions as well. Anjum, for instance expresses her joy and grief externally, but Tilotama destabilizes people with her silence. While Anjum is a good mother figure to Zainab, Tilotama constrains all such feminine instinctual feelings. Anjum and Tilo are portrayed as woman with different kinds of strength and mood. The two characters juxtapose the antithetical relationship between the homosexual and heterosexual world. They represent the conflicts in the inner and outer world, and the dilemma of encountering

life in a state of flux. The conflict within and without in each represents existential dialectics.

The second strand of the narrative revolves around the story of Tilotama and three men Musa Yewsi, Nagraj Hariharan and Biplab Das Gupta. The three men admire and love her. Tilotama is an architect turned activist. Tilo's mother Maryam Ipe, an aristocratic Syrian Christian was a teacher. She was a feminist who had conscious of her power and fought the adversities of life to carve a niche of her own. Though Tilo was her daughter she did not publicly acknowledge it for some personal reasons. She referred to her as an adopted daughter. The newspaper articles said that she was the daughter of a coolie woman and adopted by Maryam Ipe from Mount Carmel orphanage. "She was like a little piece of coal and as small as my palm, so I called her Tilottama which meant 'sesame seed' in Sanskrit" (Roy 2017, 240). She marries Naga to the utter dismay of his parents. She decides to break the relationship fourteen years after the marriage unable to "keep her discrete worlds discreet" (Roy 2017, 231).

The narrative unwinds the drifting life story of Tilotama in a world of war violence. In contrast to Anjum's tale which unfolds the internal conflicts of a transgender, Tilo's life exposes a world of external conflict. The tragic life of people in Kashmir is intricately expressed through the life of Tilo. Her quest for Musa, a Kashmiri activist, leads her into trouble. She witnesses the inhuman punishment meted out to people by the military officials. She herself becomes a victim of it and in the name of interrogation they shave her head. It is a comment on the way the state deploys and justifies its approach to gender. She tries to retaliate it by deciding never to grow her hair long anymore. Her unconventional and adventurous life breaks the barrier between her public and private sphere. Her presence in the fictional world questions such assumptions regarding the role of men and women in both the public and private world. Man is considered responsible for the productive public sphere and a woman to the reproductive private sphere. Tilotama breaks the narrowly defined assumptions of sexuality and childbearing when she decides to terminate her pregnancy medically because she believed that she would not be a good mother. Her escape from the bonds of family life, the private to the public sphere as an activist mark the emergence of her social and political identity. According to Linda Alcoff, women's subjectivity and identity constitute their position. The act of conceiving, giving birth, and breast feeding related to the body differentiates men and women. In Alcoff's (2005) opinion on biological reproduction is

"the basis of a variety of social segregations, it can engender differential forms of embodiment experienced throughout life, it can generate a wide variety of effective responses, from pride, delight, shame, guilt, regret or great relief from having successfully avoided reproduction." (Alcoff 172)

One's approach towards marriage and reproduction takes on social and cultural significance and it promotes in the creation of the gender identity of a person. Tilotama is not a stereotypical caricature of a woman and like Rahel in *The God of Small Things* she is not bound by conventions which limits and hinders the freedom of women. She was "tired of living a life that wasn't really hers at an address she oughtn't to be at" [5]. Naga, her husband also dreaded that she "was just passing through his life, like a camel crossing a desert", and "That she would surely leave him one day" [5]. She felt that she had drifted into the state of the caged Nicaraguan jaguar "Dusty, old and supremely indifferent" [5]. She stumbles out from the hospital to the Muslim graveyard at the back where she meets Anjum. Her encounter with the gorgeously dressed transgender Anjum marks the transitory reconciliation of the two worlds.

Roy's creations interpret spatial encounters as dynamic dialectic mechanisms, dealing with the race, class and caste consciousness of the characters. In terms of the dialectics of gender identity and space, Roy takes the reader in the streets of Delhi, Kashmir and some other places that are special in nature. Roy does seem to comply with the statement "nowhere is the tendency to gender space as evident in colonial, postcolonial and neo-colonial spaces" [8]. The novel also tells the stories of other people, such as R C's wife who finds space as an adhering, oppressive force. Naga gets shocked when R C told him about penalizing women by physical violence. As Roy [5] stated

"Outwardly she looked placid and perfectly content with her lot—with her houseful of mementoes and her collection of somewhat tasteless jewellery and expensive Kashmir shawls. He couldn't imagine that she was really a volcano of hidden furies that needed to be disciplined and slapped from time to time" [5].

Throughout Kashmir, women are extremely insecure, and the consequence is their bravery to take to the streets to continue their lives. Khadija, a woman from Kashmir tells Tilottama about her stamina and self-confidence. The shalwar kameez, hijab and the pheran offer them a sense of security commended by Tilottama. The nation, which is devastated by strife over years, implicates diverse magnitudes of suppression as of women, "*Women are not allowed. Women are not allowed. Women are not allowed*" [5], Roy mentioned this phrase in italics. Tilottama doesn't interrogate Khadija regarding the limitations and disparities which are frequent in the life of the Kashmiri women; nonetheless the question comes up in her mind repeatedly. Another outstanding example where Roy showcases the intricate nature of relations between body and space which is the consequence of Tilottama's decision and the process regarding MTP or medical termination of pregnancy. It is a kind of act which is belittled by everyone, incorporating the doctor, especially when the woman is not accompanied by her 'guardian' at the hospital. There is "hostility and disgust" [5]. The doctors refuse and thereby tell her that the procedure is quite unsafe. The entire experience is a frightening one; and her body are subjected to severe pain emotionally and physically.

In the Ministry of Utmost Happiness, there are about three ways in which Roy conceptualizes war, styles formed from conventions in her non-fiction writings and structured around the doubled setting of her second novel. First of which is the product of actual militarization violence and it is particularly important in Indian military actions and the struggle of the rebels in Kashmir's novel's units. This comprises a characteristic handling or twisting of radical elements in the novel and is explicated detailly below. The second war-process incorporates a quite larger gamut of 'structural' violence taken place in the name of, or in complicity with, the Indian state. As Roy has sometimes observed India seems to be "at war with itself" in its protection of inequality and its severely affected reaction to many demands for social justice. In her previous film in Delhi In Which Annie Gives it Those Ones (1988), Roy's script reveals a similarly conflictual partnership between urban residents and non-citizens: "Every Indian city consists of a "City" and a "Non-city". And they are at war with one another." [5]. In the aesthetics of Roy's city this broader skirmish is extended so that political changes take place yet core government (in Delhi) actions have significant impacts on border or peripheral spaces (such as Srinagar); and, as the psychological and physical effects, the repercussions of wars and war-like struggles like the Godhra genocide or the counterinsurgency against the Naxalite insurgents in Telangana will be coming to the national capital. Roy's third war presentation in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is chiefly subjective and has to do with characters who suffer a kind of individual and inner struggle. Where this is most apparent in Anjum's transgender 'war with herself': a kind of personal struggle that has all the effects of internal open violence and a predicament which she shares with the other eunuchs at the Khwabgah. Nimmo states that this is the war, which is "inside us. The riot is inside us. Indo-Pak is inside us. It will never settle down. It can't" [5]. If one of the most distinctive impacts of urban life, as the early sociologist of the city, Georg Simmel, recommends, is the fostering of new forms of individuation, [9], Roy's research is more often a self-conflicted or post-traumatic individualization. If a central concern develops from Roy's fiction until now, it is an aesthetic of devastation and a deep imagination of the personal consequences of violence and displacement.

The everlasting link between the war town of Srinagar and peace town of Delhi is former college-friend Biplab Dasgupta of Tilotama. This friend is also referred as 'Garson Hobart' who was Deputy Head of Intelligence in Srinagar and was also a diplomat in Kabul. In a kind of imagined litotes, Biplab from Afghanistan, looks outside the apartment at the quiet suburban of Delhi Avenue, rents to Tilotama as traditional for not being a place of war (emphasizing the ease with which harmony becomes a battle).

[c]ompared to Kabul ... this foggy little back lane ... is like a small corner of Paradise. The shops in the market sell food and flowers and clothes and mobile phones, not grenades and machine guns. Children play at ringing doorbells, not at being suicide bombers [5].

War happens in Delhi in other forms as a sign of trauma and psychological harm which Anjum brought back to town after her horrific experience of brutality in Gujarat, and Miss Jebeen is the second woman to be a survivor of a rape used as weapon in Telangana to attack Maoist people. As stated above, the civil discrepancy motive in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is also considered warlike, and the author's voice notes that Tilotama has an abortion in the Delhi hospital after her return from Kashmir: "it was like a wartime ward. Except that in Delhi there was no war other than the usual one - the war of the rich against the poor" [5].

Conclusion

The perspective of oppressed gender identities as third-space experiences depicts their challenges, revolutionary actions and their continuing stories of rebellion. Their constant struggles de-territorialise and re-territorialize, hence restructuring the assemblages which shape human survival in societies. While woman is considered as the Other—a conventional identity, the marginalised other which helps to build up the binary seems to coexist with the hegemonic class that continuously undermining and struggling hegemonic settlements and social relations—Other gender identities are struggling in the wider range to preserve their identity. They detach and develop their own social networks and social structures which establish heterotopias and struggle to survive the normative frameworks of the societies. Literary narratives, if they are to consider the interrelationship of space and class, appear like Arundhati Roy's book, as an important cultural trope of every specific historical period.

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