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Research Article

Repositioning the Subaltern in Modern Indian History: A Close Look at Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

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Abstract

This paper explores the representation of the subaltern in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, focusing on how the novel engages with the complexities of modern Indian history. Through a critical analysis of Roy's characters and narrative structure, the study examines how the marginalized voices are not only central to the storyline but also serve as a lens through which the socio-political realities of contemporary India are refracted. The research investigates the intersection of caste, gender, religion, and class in shaping the experiences of the subaltern, and how these intersecting identities challenge the dominant historical narratives. By repositioning these often silenced voices within the broader discourse of modern Indian history, Roy's work highlights the ongoing struggles for justice and equality. This paper contends that *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* offers a profound critique of historical marginalization and calls for a reevaluation of the power structures that continue to exclude these voices from mainstream historical accounts.

Keywords: Subaltern, Modern Indian History, Arundhati Roy, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Marginalized Voices, Intersectionality, Caste, Gender, Historical Narrative, Social Justice.

Introduction: The Subaltern and Its Historical Context

The term *subaltern*, first introduced by the Italian Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci, refers to groups in society that are politically marginalized and oppressed. Gramsci used the

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concept to describe the working classes, peasants, and other disenfranchised groups excluded from the power structures of the state and society (Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*). Within this framework, the subaltern is not merely passive but is rendered voiceless and marginalized by the ideological and coercive forces of the ruling class. In postcolonial studies, this concept takes on a more specific focus, particularly concerning the legacy of colonialism and how formerly colonized peoples continue to be excluded from dominant historical and cultural narratives.

The question of whether the subaltern can speak—a central concern in postcolonial scholarship—was powerfully addressed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her seminal essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988). Spivak explores how the subaltern is often not just silenced but also shaped by the very forces that oppress them. Through her analysis, Spivak critiques the notion that the subaltern can be readily heard or understood within dominant discourses, arguing that power structures actively suppress their ability to articulate their own experiences. As she famously states, “The subaltern cannot speak. There is no space from which to speak” (Spivak 104).

In the Indian context, the intersection of colonialism, caste, gender, and religion has historically shaped the subaltern experience. India's deeply entrenched social hierarchies, notably the caste system, have excluded significant segments of the population from political and social life. This historical marginalization, which continues in post-independence India, shapes the lives of groups such as Dalits (formerly known as “Untouchables”) and religious minorities, particularly Muslims. Scholars such as Uma Chakravarti and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan argue that the subaltern in India is defined not only by caste but also by gender and religion, factors that compound the exclusion of these groups from the mainstream political discourse (Chakravarti 89; Sunder Rajan 45).

The ongoing struggle of these marginalized groups for equality and recognition challenges dominant historical narratives, which often center on the experiences of the elite. As historian Gyanendra Pandey observes, the official history of postcolonial India is implicated in the erasure of subaltern experiences (Pandey 32). In response to this historical marginalization, scholars have turned to alternative methodologies, such as subaltern historiography, to recover the voices and experiences of these groups, as exemplified by the work of Ranajit Guha and the Subaltern Studies collective.

This paper explores the ways in which subaltern historiography and literature, particularly Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), challenge dominant narratives and give voice to the marginalized. By analyzing the novel's portrayal of subaltern characters and its narrative strategies, the paper demonstrates how Roy's work functions as a counter-narrative that repositions the subaltern in modern Indian history.

Hypothesis:

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* offers a radical counter-narrative that centers the voices of marginalized and subaltern communities. It gives an alternative historical discourse that challenges dominant cultural, political, and social narratives in contemporary

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India. Through innovative narrative techniques and the intersectionality of caste, gender, religion, and class, Roy reimagines the history and struggles of marginalized groups, pushing the boundaries of traditional postcolonial discourse.

Objectives:

1. To explore how *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* provides a voice to subaltern communities, counteracting their historical silencing within dominant historical narratives.
2. To analyze the intersectionality of caste, gender, religion, and class in Roy's portrayal of marginalized identities.
3. To examine Roy's narrative strategies, such as fragmented storytelling and magical realism, in giving agency to subaltern characters.
4. To assess the role of the novel as a counter-narrative in postcolonial India, contributing to the deconstruction of hegemonic power structures.

Methodology:

This paper employs a qualitative textual analysis of Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Using postcolonial and subaltern theory, the analysis focuses on the representation of marginalized characters, specifically those from Dalit, Muslim, hijra, and other marginalized communities, to understand how Roy challenges and reconfigures traditional historical narratives. The research draws on a close reading of the text, highlighting the intersectionality of identity and the narrative techniques Roy employs. Additionally, secondary sources such as critical essays and theoretical works from scholars like Gayatri Spivak and Ranajit Guha will be used to frame Roy's work within the broader context of subaltern studies and postcolonial discourse.

Subaltern Historiography and Its Critique

Subaltern historiography, a term popularized by Ranajit Guha and his collaborators in the Subaltern Studies group, seeks to rewrite history by focusing on the lives of marginalized communities. In his essay, "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India," Guha critiques traditional historical narratives for neglecting or distorting the experiences of ordinary people, particularly those on society's margins (Guha 35). He argues that mainstream histories often obscure the contributions and struggles of the subaltern in favor of elite perspectives. By centering the subaltern in historical inquiry, scholars aim to provide a more inclusive, nuanced understanding of India's past, one that challenges hegemonic narratives.

Uma Chakravarti's analysis of caste in colonial India exemplifies this approach. She argues that caste is the foundational principle of social inequality in India and that its impact cannot be understood outside of the colonial context (Chakravarti 89). Colonial rule exacerbated caste divisions, creating entrenched social hierarchies that persist into post-independence India. Similarly, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan highlights how the intersection of caste, gender, and religion has historically relegated women—especially those from lower castes and religious minorities—to the position of the subaltern (Sunder Rajan 45).

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The erasure of the subaltern's experience in official histories is further exacerbated by post-independence India's focus on the nation-building project. While the state formally abolished untouchability and enshrined the promise of equality in its constitution, marginalized groups continue to face systemic barriers in education, political representation, and economic mobility. This ongoing marginalization is most evident in the lives of Dalits, women, and religious minorities, whose struggles for recognition often remain overshadowed by the dominant historical narratives.

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* as a Counter-Narrative

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* serves as a significant literary contribution to the subaltern narrative, offering a vivid portrayal of marginalized communities in contemporary India. The novel's expansive scope, multi-layered structure, and its focus on subaltern characters allow it to function as a counter-narrative to the dominant historical and cultural discourses that have traditionally excluded these voices.

One of the novel's key strengths is its emphasis on marginalized characters, particularly those who belong to caste, gender, and religious minorities. The character of Anjum, a hijra (transgender person), is a central figure in this regard. Anjum's story, which spans issues of gender identity, religion, and exclusion from both her family and society, epitomizes the intersectional nature of subaltern identity. As Anjum reflects, "The world was always too full of people who didn't matter. The world had no space for people like her" (Roy 63). This poignant line speaks to the systematic invisibility of marginalized individuals, particularly those who challenge societal norms of gender and sexuality.

Through Anjum's narrative, Roy challenges the assumption that the subaltern is incapable of speaking. Anjum's journey, marked by rejection and alienation, is also one of survival and resilience. The space she carves out for herself in a mosque-turned-refuge becomes a symbol of resistance and self-determination. This spatial transformation reflects how marginalized groups often create their own spaces of resistance, solidarity, and survival in response to oppressive social forces.

Similarly, Bibi, a Muslim woman who survives the violent 2002 Gujarat riots, represents the intersection of religion, caste, and gender in the postcolonial Indian context. Bibi's life is shaped by religious violence and the trauma of displacement, as she navigates a society that refuses to recognize her suffering. As Bibi notes, "In India, there is a kind of truth that only the dead know, and the dead are not allowed to speak" (Roy 121). Bibi's words highlight the erasure of Muslim victims of the riots and the broader silencing of religious minorities in India's political discourse.

Through Anjum, Bibi, and other marginalized characters, Roy amplifies the voices of the subaltern, illustrating that these figures are not passive victims of history but active agents of their own narratives. The novel's portrayal of these characters as resilient survivors challenges the dominant discourse that often renders them invisible or voiceless.

Narrative Strategies to Vocalize the Subaltern

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Roy's use of narrative techniques such as fragmented storytelling, multiple perspectives, non-linear timelines, and magical realism enhances her ability to give voice to the subaltern. These techniques enable the novel to present the complexity of subaltern experiences, allowing readers to understand the disjointed, fragmented, and often contradictory nature of life on the margins.

The non-linear structure of the novel mirrors the fractured and chaotic nature of subaltern existence. Roy's shifting between personal stories and larger political events allows her to explore how individual lives are shaped by broader socio-political forces. This disjointed narrative reflects the unpredictable and often disorienting nature of life for those living on the periphery of society.

Roy also uses magical realism to create space for the subaltern to articulate their emotional and spiritual experiences. The surreal elements in the novel, such as the transformation of the mosque into a refuge for hijras or Anjum's ability to communicate with the dead, allow marginalized characters to express themselves in ways that transcend the limitations of the material world. These magical elements offer a form of resistance, as they empower the subaltern to reclaim their subjectivity and resist the forces of violence and marginalization they face in everyday life.

Intersectionality: Caste, Gender, Religion, and Class

One of the central themes in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is the exploration of the intersectionality of caste, gender, religion, and class in the lives of the subaltern. Roy intricately weaves these overlapping identities into the stories of her marginalized characters, demonstrating that oppression is not a monolithic experience. Rather, marginalization is shaped by the complex interplay of these intersecting factors, creating multifaceted experiences of exclusion and resistance.

Anjum, one of the central characters in the novel, epitomizes the intersectionality of caste, gender, and religion. As a hijra, Anjum faces gender-based marginalization, but her identity as a Muslim further compounds her experience of exclusion. Anjum's struggles are not solely defined by her gender identity but are intricately linked to her religious and cultural background, illustrating how these forms of oppression intersect. For instance, she is rejected not only by her family but also by the larger Muslim community, who sees her hijra identity as a source of shame. In one moment of reflection, Anjum states, "The world was always too full of people who didn't matter. The world had no space for people like her" (Roy 63). This poignant line speaks to the compounded invisibility Anjum faces—not just as a hijra, but as a Muslim and a person outside the norms of both her gender and religious communities. Roy's portrayal of Anjum reveals how marginalized individuals are pushed to the peripheries of society, not simply because of one aspect of their identity, but due to the complex intersections of gender, caste, and religion.

Similarly, the character of Aftab, a Dalit Muslim, underscores the layered oppression faced by those who inhabit multiple marginalized identities. Aftab's experiences reflect the compounded struggles of caste and religious identity, as he faces the oppression of both being

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from a lower caste and a religious minority. As a Dalit, he is subjected to the brutal caste discrimination that pervades much of Indian society, while as a Muslim, he also suffers from the widespread religious prejudice that has increased in post-independence India. His marginalization is not simply a product of one identity, but a fusion of caste and religion, creating a unique and compounded form of exclusion. Roy demonstrates this complex oppression through Aftab's journey of survival and resistance. In one scene, Aftab reflects on the bleakness of his position: "For a man like me, there is no place in this country except in the margins" (Roy 200). This statement captures the profound isolation experienced by those who belong to multiple marginalized communities, suggesting that their existence is continually overshadowed by the dominant societal structures that erase their humanity.

Roy's focus on these intersectional identities challenges the traditional understanding of the subaltern as a singular, uniform category. Instead, the novel presents a nuanced view of subalternity, one that recognizes the ways in which caste, gender, religion, and class work together to shape individual experiences of oppression. This intersectional lens highlights the diversity of the subaltern experience and allows Roy to portray the multiple layers of resistance within marginalized communities. Through characters like Anjum and Aftab, Roy illustrates how marginalized individuals navigate these overlapping forms of oppression to assert their agency and reclaim their dignity. Anjum's journey to creating a community for hijras, for example, reflects not just an assertion of gender identity but a broader resistance to the societal structures that seek to silence her. Her transformation of a mosque into a sanctuary for hijras becomes a symbolic act of resistance, where gender identity and religious identity are no longer sources of marginalization, but tools for self-determination.

Roy's portrayal of the intersectionality of caste, gender, religion, and class also serves as a powerful critique of the dominant social and political structures in India. In post-colonial India, these intersecting identities are often not only sources of personal oppression but also collective sources of political resistance. By weaving these complex identities into the fabric of her characters' lives, Roy reveals how the subaltern's struggle for justice is multifaceted and deeply connected to the larger socio-political realities of contemporary India. As theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw, who coined the term intersectionality, writes, "Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects" (Crenshaw 1244). Roy's narrative does exactly this—by focusing on the interconnectedness of caste, gender, religion, and class, the novel exposes the multiple sites where power intersects and perpetuates oppression. The characters in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* are not only victims of these intersecting power structures but also active participants in the resistance to them.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Arundhati Roy redefines the narrative of modern Indian history by repositioning the subaltern in a way that challenges dominant historical discourses. Through the intricate stories of marginalized characters—Dalits, Muslims, hijras, and other oppressed communities—Roy gives voice to those who have

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long been silenced by hegemonic power structures. By exploring the intersectionality of caste, gender, religion, and class, Roy unveils the complexity of oppression in postcolonial India, highlighting how these interconnected identities shape the lived experiences of subaltern figures. The novel's fragmented narrative, multi-perspective storytelling, and use of magical realism create a platform where the subaltern not only survives but actively resists and reimagines their existence. Roy's portrayal of characters like Anjum, Aftab, and Bibi exemplifies how marginalized groups navigate both personal and collective struggles for recognition and justice. These characters embody the resilience of the subaltern, resisting the erasure of their histories and asserting their right to be seen and heard. Ultimately, Roy's novel functions as a counter-narrative to the traditional historical accounts that have often marginalized these communities. In repositioning the subaltern within the context of modern Indian history, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* urges readers to reconsider the way history is written, advocating for a more inclusive narrative that recognizes the agency and humanity of all individuals, regardless of their social standing. Through this powerful reimagining, Roy calls for a broader, more equitable understanding of history—one that includes the voices of the oppressed and challenges the injustices of the past.

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