

**THE NEW SUBALTERN IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S *THE MINISTRY OF UTMOST HAPPINESS*: A POSTCOLONIAL STUDY**

**Nusrat Jahan**

Lecturer in English

Faculty of Biological Sciences

University of Chittagong

Chattogram --- 4331

Bangladesh.

Email: [njahan@cu.ac.bd](mailto:njahan@cu.ac.bd)

Mobile: 01764798418

Web: [https://cu.ac.bd/public\\_profile/index.php?ein=5635](https://cu.ac.bd/public_profile/index.php?ein=5635)

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**ABSTRACT:** *Post-colonial theory has always been one of the most attractive academic fields of study since Indian sub-continent got freedom from colonization. The concept “subaltern” is the offspring of post-colonial situation that have triggered piles and piles of literature. With the advantage of socio-economic condition, the definition as well attributes associated to the term “subaltern” has altered a lot. Being a conscious writer, Arundhati Roy has concentrated her second fiction *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* as a camouflage of contemporary socio-political problems that are relevant to the study of “subaltern”, specifically in South-Asian context. The novel is literally about everybody and everything happening in rapidly changing India, particularly about displaced and marginalized ones as the book is dedicated to “*The Unconsoled*”. Through the protagonist or the main character of novel, transgender issue was evoked. Other ongoing problems like gender discrimination, caste inequality, capitalism and many more socio-political facts were equally addressed. Arundhati Roy is an active activist and has a prolific career with books on capitalism, globalization and democracy. Thus *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is undoubtedly and instinctively an outburst of author’s observation of the “*The New Subaltern*” who are the victim of social and political unfair. So, this paper aims at examining Roy’s depiction of “*The New Subaltern*” in a setting of democratic India through her characters framing them into post-colonial situation. As the study of subaltern is ever-changing, this articles also attempts to trace the development of the subaltern study in south Asia.***Contribution/originality:** *This article impart a new dimension to the ‘Subaltern Studies’, in broad post-colonial literature studies by demonstrating Roy’s perception of the new subaltern in presenting her novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. This also scrutinizes the novel in terms of its characters, language and socio-political context presented by author.*

**KEY WORDS:** the new subaltern, transgender, caste problem, third world women, socio-political unfair.

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## INTRODUCTION

Arundhati Roy, a Booker prize winning novelist needs no introduction. After a long period of 20 years, she has come with her second novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, a wondrous book that clearly has aroused a storm of discussion among the

critics that is due to her continuous remarkable non-fiction writing. After the success of her second novel *The God of Small Things*, Roy gradually has evolved from a novelist to non-fiction writer and activist. She always has spoken her mind and quiet clear about her socio-political ideas as she directly opposed India's nuclear explosion in 1998, the American policy in Afghanistan and Israel's policies in West Asia. Roy takes similar interest in national politics and makes clear of her view about Kashmir with books like *Kashmir: The Case of Freedom* (2011) and *The Hanging of Afzal Guru and The Strange Case of Attack on the Indian Parliament* (2013).

Moreover, Roy is a prodigious critic of social injustice that is obvious in South-Asian context. Roy has always punctuated the proliferating gap between the powerful and the powerless in contemporary India. She argues 'At some point, we have to [.....] realize that the inequality in our society has gone too far. Take for instance the refrain that India is a country of one billion people [.....] the truth is that we are a nation of 50 million people and the rest are not treated as people (Tickell, 2007). Alongside oppression in the name of gender and religion, the most instinctive form of social injustice in India is caste system. Caste inequality is formed as one of the prominent theme in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* and Roy condemned about the problem in *The Cost of Living* criticizing the Narmada river dam schemes. Here Roy (2001) uses architectural metaphor to describe the social construction of caste system:

'What percentage of the people who plans these mammoth [dam] projects are [untouchable or tribal...] or even rural? Zero. There is no egalitarian social contact whatsoever between the two worlds. Deep at the heart of the horror of what's going on lies the caste system: these layered horizontally divided society with no vertical bolt, no glue – no intermarriage, no social mingling, no human – humane – interaction that holds the layers together. So when the bottom half of society simply shears off and falls away it happens silently. It doesn't create the torsion, the upheaval, the blowout, the sheer structural damage that it might, had there been the equivalent of vertical bolts. This works perfectly for the supporters of these projects.'

It is clearly evident that Roy is 'consistent in her commitment to "small things" if it was mainly children afflicted by quietness and emptiness in the first, here it is a motley group of displaced and marginalized people who set up residence among tombstones'(Kanjirakkat, 2017; Jobin, 2017). Roy proved herself an enormous social critic as her 'eyes remain sharply delightful as she captures the larger Indian reality of the subtleties of caste system, describes the Hijra (transgender) community in Delhi' (Kanjirakkat, 2017; Jobin, 2017). This novel is the epitaph of marginalized people as her friend, Pankaj Mishra has said Roy's sympathies are always with the powerless and this sets *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* apart from other important novels of the past half century. Roy's obsession with the downtrodden, her role as a social activist and the publication of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* has prompted numbers of critical essays. But prior to examine these reading, it is imperative to consider how Roy's absorption with social downtrodden constitutes the query of the conceptual question of "subaltern" that has been a big concern of Indian Historians and Postcolonial critics.

## **Theoretical Background**

Post-colonial theory is an umbrella concept which contains numerous dimensions. That is why this very concept doesn't have any concrete definition. In short post-colonialism is simply about the belief, culture and socio-economic condition of the people who went under imperial process as well as are under masked imperialism. McLeod (2011) in his treatise *Beginning Post Colonialism* opines that "the term 'post-colonialism' is not the same as 'after colonization'; rather, it is an attempt to break away from colonial discourse, from the challenge of knowing the colonial ways".

**Gramscian View of "Subaltern":** Subaltern, in the first place refer to an officer holding a military rank just below that of captain in British army. This term was coined as a political term and was first introduced by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci in his article "Notes on Italian History" which was added later on to his widely famous book *Prison Notebooks* that was written between 1929 and 1930. Here Gramsci's viewpoint is quiet not the same as the straight-line of Marxist traditional studies that was clearly based on economy. With the notion of subaltern, Gramsci differentiated a lower class or group of people who were deprived of their identities in local history and culture under direct as well as hegemonic domination of social elite class. Gramsci purposely used the term "subaltern" instead of "proletarian" to avoid blue pencil but it soon had come to indicate less organized working class groups such as peasants and farm laborer (Spivak, 2000). Gramsci intended to make their (subaltern) voice and culture heard as they were subsequently absent from the historical narrative of the dominant ruling classes. Gramsci (1971) stated:

'The subaltern classes by definition are not unified and cannot unite until they are able to become a "state": their history, therefore, is intertwined with that of civil society, and thereby with the history of States and groups of States'.

In his book, Gramsci incorporated six steps with a view to study the history of subaltern group with that of the hegemonic classes and suggested they both have same complex history. Gramsci's innovation and original idea of subaltern proved to establish a new ground for the peasant and acknowledged their role as a distinct class.

**"Subaltern Studies" Group:** Preoccupied with Gramsci's idea of subaltern, other 20<sup>th</sup> century scholars who were working with Indian peasantry historiography extended the definition of subaltern. This group was led by Ranjit Guha and other South Asian historians, social critics and scholars like Touraj Atabaki, Shahid Amin, Dipesh Chakrabarty, David Arnold, Partha Chatterjee, David Hardiman, Gyan Pandey and Sumit Sarkar who dissented from the group due to its disappointing turn to post-modernism (Louai, 2012). Ranjit Guha defined the Subaltern Studies as 'a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or any other way (Guha, 1982). Instructed by the founder Guha, the group members started studying the subaltern groups as an 'objective assessment of the role of the elite and as a critique of elitist interpretations of that role (Guha, 1982). This argument emerged from the hypothesis that Indian national history was archived by 'colonial elitism as well as nationalist-bourgeois

elitism which were both produced by the British colonialism in different historical periods (Louai, 2012).

**Gayatri Chakravorty's Reappraisal of "Subaltern":** The Indian American post-colonial theorist and translator Gayatri Spivak reinterpreted the concept of subaltern that have led to more theoretical complexity. In the essay of Spivak "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography" (1988), she questioned the methodology of the Subaltern Studies historian, subsequently declared it inadequate and admonished that self-determining consciousness of the subaltern could never be gained fully from colonial or nationalist archives. Spivak further warned that instead of regaining subaltern history, they were paving way of objectifying them as earlier archives have no identical individual history of subaltern. At the same time Spivak germinated her own idea of subaltern in her groundbreaking essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?"(1988). Here Spivak questioned the assumptions made by radical French theorist Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze that the voice or the rights of the peasants can be clearly presented by saying 'we must now confront the following question: On the other side of the International divisions of labor from socialized capital, inside and outside the circuit of the epistemic violence of imperialistic law and education supplementing on earlier economic text, Can the Subaltern Speak?'(Spivak, 1988). She rather linked the idea of subaltern with that of a gendered category where she argued:

'The question is not of female participation in insurgency, or the ground rules of the sexual division of labor, for both of which there is "evidence"; rather, both were used as object of colonialist historiography and as a subject of insurgency, though the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow (Spivak, 1988).'

She also suggested women are doubly effaced by combing force of patriarchy and colonialism. Roaming about the concrete and conceptual definition, Spivak has continued her analysis of subaltern. With the advancement of technology, globalization and capitalism, the condition of subaltern, Spivak discussed, has changed its face that is identical with Roy's socio-political concerns. Now-a-days, Spivak (2000) claims 'The subaltern must be rethought. S/he is no longer cut off from lines of access to the center'. The reason behind this is that the multinational corporations are exclusively American and Eurocentric who are now eager in the specialist environmental knowledge of rural South-Asian subaltern with a view to construct "new medicine and patented crop strains". As a result, Spivak pointed out that in the name of human genetic engineering, the knowledge and lives of the subaltern is indirectly controlled by patent-holding corporations: 'The issue [...] is one of property --- and the subaltern body as *bios* or subaltern knowledge as (agri-) or (herbi-) culture is its appropriative object(2016).' This concern is closely identical with Roy's anxiety over development and the consequences of corporate projects in recent India. A recent work on subaltern studies is the book *New Subaltern Politics: Reconceptualising Hegemony and Resistance in Contemporary India* that aims to reactive a 'dialectical sensibility to our understanding of subaltern politics' (Nilson, 2016). Here he designed a conflict of interest of subaltern and that of "hegemonic projects" that actually incorporate "the

power of country's dominant groups." This recent study of the subaltern thoroughly pointed out some trends that closely co-inside with Roy's preoccupation before writing the novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*.

From this thoroughly discussion of the issue of subaltern, quiet a number of points arises that are relevant to *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. These lines;

"How to tell a shattered story?  
By slowly becoming everybody.  
No.  
By slowly becoming everything."

Actually summarize this grand novel as this is a novel about 'everything, so much anguish and joy and love and war and death and life, so much of being human' (Felicell, 2017). Thus, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* celebrates as well as upholds the subaltern life with its character portrayal and narrative style. Among other characters, Anjum, Saddam and Tilo have prominently disclosed themselves as representative of subaltern.

**Adumbration of Anjum (A Hijra) as a Representative of Subaltern:** The central character of the novel is a Hijra and in terms of rights they are the most marginalized people in a society particularly in South Asian context. Spivak in her work like "The Rani of Sirmur" argued how colonialism and patriarchy doubly combine to erase women as subaltern. In terms of a transgender it can be said that social political deprivation, patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism and even their own body altogether combine to erase them as subaltern. Nimmo, a transgender residing at Khawabgah told Anjum "D'you know why god made Hijra? [...] It was an experiment [...] a living creature that is incapable of happiness [...] for us the price rise and school admissions, husband's beatings, wives' cheatings, Hindu-Muslim riots, Indo-Pak war [...] all *inside* us. The riot is inside us. [...] The war is *inside* us. Indo-Pak is *inside* us. It will never settle down (23)." The transgender people as subaltern, as Spivak claims have no history but they are always there in the society. In Khawabgah every Hijra starts to feel identity crisis to an extent as well as struggles for their place in history that is clearly evident from their visit to the "The Sound and Light show" at "The Red Fort". Though Ustad Kulsoom Bi seemed more than satisfied with single sound in the "The Sound and Light show" that proved their existence in the history of Emperor's time. The question instantly was evoked as Kulsoom Bi asked 'so we are remembered as the forgotten ones?' (51), when Gudiye tried to argue Hijras had a special place in "Hindu Mythology" saying 'Only Hijras waited faithfully for him (Ram) at the edge of the forest for the whole fourteen years' (51).

Being almost absent from history, the little world of Khawabgah is not cut from the hegemonic Eurocentric line of cultural as well as economic domination which was claimed by Spivak. A clear example of such condition emerged when reference of Saeeda comes who 'could speak the language of the times – she could use the term *cis-*

*Man* and *FtoM* and *MtoF* (38). Sayeeda's "western cloths" and the impact of 9/11 attack in American Trade Center on the life of Anjum and her fellow Hijras clearly announces that nobody even the subalterns are not out of the reach of such American and Eurocentric capitalist world. Though Hijras are denied of their identity, they are not out of the influence of the global chain.

Anjum, as a protagonist, is opulently portrayed in the first three chapter of the fiction but Sehgal (2017, 37) argued *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* offers only a "tiny" portrayal of transgender people's lives, struggles and triumphs. In "Arundhati Roy's Fascinating Mess", Sehgal (2017) condemned Anjou's character as formulaic because of her "patched together body" and "partially realizes dreams". In Sega's word, Anjum does not really accomplish her goal. However, before this novel, no fiction ever depicted a transgender protagonist's life as well as the struggle so vividly and elaborately. This study sees Anjum in a positive light that is similar to Lertlaksanaporn's view who challenged Sehgal stating 'The process of moving towards the goal is more important than the goal itself' (2020). Anjum, like a thread, has brought all other marginalized people in one place, a graveyard and potentially becomes the representative of the subaltern as Anjum tells her friend Saddam:

'Once you have fallen off the edge like all of us have, including our Biroo,' Anjum said, 'you will never stop falling. And as you fall you will hold on to other falling people. The sooner you understand that the better. This place where we live, where we have made our home, is the place of falling people (84).'

Jannat Guest House is probably the most important setting of the novel. This graveyard not only has become a place of Anjum's liberation and self-expression but also proved to function as 'secular, sanctuary, protected by willpower from the turbulent outside world (Clark, 2018).' By making Jannat Guest House a prominent setting, Roy attempted giving a structure to her lavish dream of democracy. Roy graciously tries to redefine democracy making the graveyard a 'mehfil, a gathering of everybody and nobody, of everything and nothing. [...] Everyone's invited.' Although Anjum started and is the owner of Jannat Guest House, here each and every person is free and it has become 'a hub for Hijras [...] had fallen out of, or been expelled from the tightly administered grid of Hijra Gharanas (68).' Thus as subaltern Anjum and other marginalized people gathered in Jannat Guest House and evidently sailed to form a new identity with freedom and liberation. Lertlaksanaporn (2020) claims Deleuze and Guattari's concept of rhizome can be identified in this context as they have come to Jannat Guest House and their departure cut across the normative line of heteronormative society and the hierarchical system of the Khwabgah through the line of flight or Deterritorialization. This view is antagonized by Spivak claiming Gilles Deleuze neglects "The epistemic violence of imperialism" (1988, 289). Within a Western framework, Spivak said the subaltern cannot express their true self. But here, Roy's portrayal of Hijras as subaltern is quite different as they walk towards the possibilities of becoming. Similar view is given by Lertlaksanaporn (2020) as he argued:

‘The process of writing or speaking for the subaltern is not to present or subjugate the subaltern the subaltern into the western framework, but its aim is the process of becoming through the establishment of new connections. The writer or the speaker will become Other or become minor in the open space where the voice of the subaltern can be heard.’

So Jannat Guest House can be called a Utopia that ultimately turned out to be a paradise for these subalterns.

**Representation of the “Subaltern” in Terms of Caste:** Caste inequality is most common accepted social problem in South Asia, particularly in India. One of the significant characters in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is Saddam, a friend of Anjum as well as a Dalit who becomes a model of caste inequality. The issue of “Untouchability” as well as the question of subaltern arose with the entrance of Saddam as social structure permit him to express limitedly. Saddam in this fiction can be considered as the fictional representation of the subaltern. He lacks artistic articulation of a fictional character except some limited details like “literate, pleasant-looking man in good health (75).” Though is a minor character and has little artistic articulation, Saddam’s story is very important as Roy (2017) told ‘I wanted even the smallest character to have a story. I wanted the background to sometimes become the foreground.’

Saddam as a subaltern has no identity as he had to change his name from “Dayachand” to “Saddam Hossain” and his constant struggle to be fixed in a job indicate how subalterns are socially and economically deprived. Saddam became the “part of the mob” and this agitated mob killed Saddam’s father in charge of “cow-slaughter”. The irony is that even a cow’s life is more important than a Dalit’s life. However, some critics like Lahiri (2017) criticized “the dialogue between Anjum and Saddam over his past” and claimed “it as a ruse to explain caste rituals in detail that overload the immediate narrative flow” as well as “inelegant information nuggets.” Though unartistic description, this very detail can well picture the enduring form of social norm of caste system. At another place of the novel, similar incident took place again Roy acclaimed the real circumstance saying ‘they accuse you of eating beef and then take over your house and your land and send you to a refugee camp. It’s all about property, not cows (402).’ From this statement, it is clear that the benefit of this kind of oppressive incident directly goes to patent holding corporates placing subalterns at the risk of being immigrant or refugee. Against this process they have nothing to do or say as the social construction does not allow them to speak.

**Interpretation of Women as “Subaltern”:** The narratives of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* evolve around a female character, Tilo, a half Dalit wondering women. If we recall Spivak’s notion of “subaltern” as a gendered category in which women are doubly effaced, Tilo can be identified as an obvious subaltern figure. The family background of tilo is important in this regard as Tilo’s mother had an affair with “the man, who belonged to an ‘untouchable caste’; had been dispensed with in ways high-caste families in India – in this case Syrian Christians from Kerala” and consequently “Her family disowned her (155).” This easily reminds us of Ammu and Velutha’s love

affair and both of the affairs are relevant to the representation of subaltern as Tickell (2007) suggested ‘by staging Ammu and Velutha’s affair as one of the central events of TGST, Roy seems to suggest a possible commonality in their – differently experienced – subalternity.’ Here Maryam Ipe and her low caste lover like Ammu and Velutha “represent the oppressive intersection of historically sanctioned forms of subordination (in this case caste *and* gender) that make up the theoretical category of the subaltern.”

Tilo, by born a half - Dalit as well as a subaltern doesn’t display any feature of conventional sophisticated lady. Roy (2017) told in her interview ‘Tilo does not react in ways that women are expected to, and this puts everything out of Kitter.’ Tilo, being an independent girl lives alone does whatever she likes. Being a single woman, she is a subtle threat to the orthodox patriarchal structure of society where a woman cannot live alone. At the same she is vulnerable in a structured society as Biplab Dasgupta described her “like a paper boat on a boisterous sea (160).” Spivak (1991) argues that Hindu women “disappeared, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling, which is the displaced figuration of the ‘third-world woman’ caught between tradition and modernization.” Similarly, being a third world woman, Tilo is caught between tradition and modernization. Though Tilo is educated and independent, Biplab Dasgupta couldn’t marry her because his ‘Brahmin Parents, would never accept her – the girl without a past, without a caste – into the family (161).’ Despite all of these, Tilo continued her fight against the system and “The background story of a troubled relationship with her mother clarifies little Tilo’s quiet yet determined resistance to the system (Lahiri, 2017).” Thus, Tilo proved herself as a silent revolutionist and a groundbreaker.

**Development – a Tool to Deprive “Subalterns”:** Roy’s constant cynicism towards development project is eminently present in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. The multinational capitalist projects that are grasping our identity and destroying the primitive nature and Roy seems to be disturbed of such development. She expressed it in the fiction in many places including a statement “Skyscrapers and steel factories sprang up where forests used to be, rivers were bottled and sold in supermarkets, fish were tinned, mountains mined and turned into shinning missiles (98). Sinha (2015) in *New Subaltern Politics: Reconceptualising Hegemony and Resistance in Contemporary India* accused the state for not being “an active agent of primitive accumulation” and pointed out how state sometimes displace the subaltern with violent force for establishing economic zone and globalized city (p.230). This statement is surprisingly relevant to Roy’s concern for “surplus people” who were living in “slums and squatter settlements, in resettlement colonies” and “unauthorized colonies” and were evicted in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Roy’s sarcastic statement “Somebody has to pay the price of progress, they said expertly (99)” is similar to Spivak’s concern for subaltern in a socialized capitalist state in the book *The Spivak Reader*. Here Spivak stated ‘The subaltern is affected remotely by socialized capital. It is just that in the subaltern subject production the process is remote. Especially today, when one talks about Colonial historiography and the financialized globe it would be hard to find [...] a group that is not affected by socialized capital (1996, p.292).’ In *The Ministry of*



*Utmost Happiness* the price for a globalized city is paid by these surplus people, a group of subaltern.

### **Problems of “Representing Subaltern”:**

In the process of writing for subaltern in her fictions as well as non-fictions, Roy is often presented as a subaltern herself. Roy’s sympathy is always with the marginalized people and Spivak warned ‘Often what happens is that [...] intellectuals [...] who become spokespersons for subalternity are taken as token subalterns (1996, 292).’ Thus Roy is in the risk of becoming a subaltern. Roy refuses to discuss the issue of subaltern representation as there is an approach where intellectuals and specialist are seen as threat to silence the voice of subaltern in the process of representing or speaking for them. This brings, in turn, to a related problem, that of Roy’s power to represent and thus potentially silence the subaltern herself (Tickell, 2007). But representing subaltern in literature is not representing then in Western or colonial framework, rather making new connections slowly becoming a part of the subaltern. Moreover, in Spivak’s theorizing, literature can provide “an alternative rhetorical site for articulating the histories of subaltern women.”

### **CONCLUSION**

To conclude, it can be said that *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* presents the unbearable conditions of the subaltern. This study mainly attempts to scrutinize the representation of marginalized people in South Asian context. In this study, it is also attempted to retrace the evolution of the term “subaltern” and how subaltern are doing in this advanced and globalized world. From the examination of the representation of the “subaltern” it is clear that the condition of the subaltern have not changed much. In colonial time they were the victim of colonization and now they are the victim of a subtle and sustainable social cycle of domination that is structured by socialized capitalism. In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* majority of the character can be categorized as subaltern in terms of gender, caste, class etc. Study shows how Anjum, the transgender protagonist being the victim of social political deprivation, sails to build a paradise of her own where falling people from all corner of the society gathered. This study also analyses the worst situation of discrimination in the name of caste inequality. It also shows Roy’s portrayal of the vulnerability of subaltern in globalized city and capitalist society.

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