

Exploring Gender, Identity, And Socio-Political Realities in Arundhati Roy's the Ministry of Utmost Happiness

Dr.Nilima Prakash

Assistant Professor (Guest), Department of Literature and Languages, J.C.Bose University of Science and Technology ,Haryana, India

Abstract

Gender issue has always been constructing its stance in the social political domain. This paper explores the Gender perspective from a socio-political angle, the ways non-heterosexual young people are negotiating their identities and socio-sexual relations. In the novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), Arundhati Roy has suggested various socio-political issues and Gender roleplay. The novel has been written in the backdrop of riots in India and Pakistan. This novel revolves around a character named Anjum who is hermaphrodite. Through Anjum, Roy seeks to portray the situation of the third gender in Indian society. This novel helps in portraying love that comes in all forms and does not discriminate among individuals based on political, social or sexual identity. Thus, the novel seeks the way ultimate utmost happiness can be achieved through love and acceptance as it has the capability of bringing unity which is acknowledging even the socially outcast people and offering them equal opportunities.

Keywords: gender, identity, social, political, religion

Introduction

The Indian author of the modern era in the history of English literature, Arundhati Roy weaved the Indian political condition with the social concept of gender and identity in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. She also presented the turmoil between two religious identities, Hindu and Muslim for the rise of 'Hindutva'¹. Socio-political relations were reflected among the characters and their lives as Musa and Naga were connected to Governmental agencies. Gender identity was pathetically revealed when Anjum, a transgender was presented as a boy by his family. On the other hand, Anjum was refused to be killed by massacre terrorists, as killing 'hijra' was a sin. Furthermore, the feminine soul of Anjum allowed her to adopt a left female child and live motherhood.

This study aims to explore gender, identity, and socio-political realities in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017). The objectives are to assess the presentation of gender in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, to evaluate different types of identity, such as gender, religion, race, and professionalism in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* and to elucidate socio-political

¹Ganguly, Swati. "Arundhati Roy, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*." *Asiatic: IIUM Journal of English Language and Literature* 11.2 (2017): 133-137. (p. 134)

realities in contemporary India and its effect on common people in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*.

The novel presents social division related to Indian History, a sense of inclusion, oppression and marginalisation during the political turmoil in India due to the India-Kashmir War and the riot between Hindus and Muslims in Gujrat². Hence, it is required to understand the power of gender, identity and socio-political realities, among too many scattered incidents, to understand modern India.

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) presents gender identity and sexual congruity through the character of Anjum. By-borne transgender Anjum was presented as a male son, with the name Aftab; furthermore, his father shared stories of great warriors to form a masculine soul within him. However, his singing skills left him being taunted by peers as singing was considered a feminine activity³. However, Aftab's inner womanly feeling lets her be a 'hijra' and find her actual self. This intersex identity was not accepted in Indian society, which forced her to make a home in a graveyard. This character also presents the pain and suffering of the LGBT community in contemporary India.

Roy portrayed the sense of 'binarism' and the identity of 'others'; this binarism is eminent between Hindus and Muslims; males, females, and intersex; touchable and untouchable, and people from city and graveyard. Suddam Hossain also suffered due to his belonging to a lower caste or untouchable group. Roy sharply caricatured the Indian politicians as "The Poet Prime Minister" (Atal Bihari Vajpayee), "trapped rabbit" (Manmohan Singh), "Ghandian" (Anna Hazare), "Mr. Aggerval" (Arvind Kejriwal), "Gujarat ka lalla" (Narendra Modi)"⁴ (Chaudhry and Mustafa, 493). Hatred and prejudice against Muslims were seen during the Kashmir insurgency; however, these religious identities were united by one gender identity, that is transgender. In the Hindu Massacre, Anjum was not killed as killing 'hijras' was a sin.

The novel presents war-stricken turmoil due to the 2002 Godhra train burning, the Kashmir insurgency, and the Hindu-Muslim riot. Roy observed India to be "at war with itself". Inequality and inequity are high concerns for the development of the religious riots and disgust for one another⁵. Hatred for Muslims is clear in the following lines

"Muslim Terrorists do not deserve Human Rights!" shouted Gujarat ka Lalla's undercover janissaries. 'We have seen your genocide! We have faced your ethnic cleansing!...' (Roy, 17)

While the train burning incident for Naxalite insurgence and Hindu-Muslim riot was present, Roy sketched an inner war of identity within Anjum.

²Ganguly, Swati. "Arundhati Roy, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*." *Asiatic: IJUM Journal of English Language and Literature* 11.2 (2017): 133-137. (p. 134)

³Anuar, Nur Ain Nasuha Binti, and Moussa Pourya Asl. "Gender and Sexual Identity in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*: A Cixousian Analysis of Hijra's Resistance and Remaking of the Self." *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities* 29.4 (2021). (p. 2335)

⁴Chaudhry, Zoya Jamil, and Rizwan Mustafa. "Representation of 'the other': tracing the 'otherized' segments of contemporary Indian society in Arundhati Roy's *the ministry of utmost happiness*." *South Asian Studies* 34.02 (2019): 489-504. (p. 493)

⁵Suleman, Dr Danish, Abdul Halim Mohamed, and Md Firoj Ahmmed. "Political and Gender issues in Arundhati Roy's' *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*." *Suleman, D., Mohamed, AH, & Ahmmed, MF (2020). Political and Gender issues in Arundhati Roy's" The Ministry of Utmost Happiness". Indonesian Journal of Cultural and Community Development* 5 (2020): 10-21070. (p. 9)

Cixous' "inherent bisexuality" explains the desire and seeking permission to embody both 'masculine' and 'feminine' urges within one body simultaneously. This is a "reversal of the binary terms -- by valorising feminine sexuality over the phallic"⁶. The character of Anjum rightly resembles such desire. Edward Said's theory of "the Self" and "the Others" is utilised in this novel to assess the discriminatory mentality of common people regarding religion, race, and culture⁷.

This study has used a secondary qualitative approach to explore gender, identity, and socio-political realities in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017). It gathered important data from book reviews on authentic and governmental sites. Secondary sources of data assisted in gathering information within a limited timeframe and limited effort. This study also used a qualitative thematic technique to assess gathered data systematically. The qualitative analysis process answers complex research questions, such as "what", "how", and "in which way". Furthermore, this study developed themes to conduct a systematic analysis in six steps; at first, gathered data was generalised, and then codes were generated to develop themes from those⁸. After that themes were reviewed and named; finally, the report was presented in a written form. This thematic analysis also meets the research objectives one by one.

The novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) paints the life of Anjum and Roy and seeks to break the stereotype associated with hijras in Indian society⁹. In the novel, love and sexuality are interconnected and love is considered to be a major theme in the novel. The sexual identity of Anjum exceeds the conventional norm of society. In order to portray the gender reality, Arundhati Roy portrayed different characters with various sexual preferences. Roy seeks to underscore that despite the sexual difference love is eternal. In the novel, Anjum is regarded as a man by both society and his parents. However, Anjum feels like she is a woman from the inside. Moreover, Anjum is a homosexual and she has a male body and soul of a woman who wants to have her own child. Furthermore, Zainab was thought to be Anjum's only love and she found him on Jama Masjid. When found Zanaib, she got someone to love and she wanted to be loved also. However, their love did not progress and Saddam married Zanaib. Anjum's complex sexuality has resulted in such a condition. Despite the love, Anjum could become a conventional wife. Saddam chose Zainab as she was a complete woman from inside and outside who will make a good wife and also bear child and Zainab is also accepted by society¹⁰.

As things progressed, Tilo had belonged to a place which Anjum called Duniya, which is the heterosexual world. In this novel, Tilo is someone who cares about herself only and does not care about the world. Similar to Anjum, Tilo is also a lonely soul and she never receives the love of her family or lover from her mother. She has gone through a lot of suffering and changed her completely. The final line in the novel

⁶Anuar, Nur Ain Nasuha Binti, and Moussa Pourya Asl. "Gender and Sexual Identity in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*: A Cixousian Analysis of Hijra's Resistance and Remaking of the Self." *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities* 29.4 (2021). (P. 2339)

⁷Chaudhry, Zoya Jamil, and Rizwan Mustafa. "Representation of 'the other': tracing the 'otherized' segments of contemporary Indian society in Arundhati Roy's *the ministry of utmost happiness*." *South Asian Studies* 34.02 (2019): 489-504. (p. 493)

⁸Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. "Conceptual and design thinking for thematic analysis." *Qualitative psychology* 9.1 (2022): 3. (p. 8)

⁹Devi, K. K. *Societal Identity: An Exploration of Ongoing Battle with Society and Self in Arundhati Roy's 'The Ministry of Utmost Happiness'* (2023). (p. 172)

¹⁰Assumi, Inakali. "Sexuality and Love in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*." *Contemporary Literary Review India* 8.4 (2021): 12-25. (P. 17)

states a new hope in a loveless world. Arundhati Roy strives to have an optimistic outlook for a better world. By a better world, she means no kind of discrimination in regard to creed, caste, religion, and sexual identity¹¹. She seeks to have a world where individuality is given importance rather than the context of social differences. Integrating love in the novel, she underscores the similarity of love irrespective of homosexual and heterosexual.

Conclusion

This study found that Arundhati Roy in her *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) vividly portrayed the way the sense of discrimination is evident in current India. The political comparison between the politicians in the novel *Present India* was interesting in understanding the issues of Indian politics. Transgenders are still not socially accepted in the patriarchal society of India; similarly, Dalits and minority classes also continue their sufferings here. The conflict between Hindus and Muslims is also common in contemporary India, which even can result in an existence crisis for both these religious communities. Despite all differences and discriminations, all are united by love.

The government needs to handle the religious conflicts seriously; furthermore, human rights for transgenders and all other persons in LGBTQ+ groups are important for their healthy and socially accepted living. Proper policies can facilitate equal and equitable value for all Indian citizens.

References

Primary source

1. Roy, Arundhati. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. UK: Hamish Hamilton. 2017.

Secondary sources

2. Anuar, Nur Ain Nasuha Binti, and Moussa Pourya Asl. "Gender and Sexual Identity in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*: A Cixousian Analysis of Hijra's Resistance and Remaking of the Self." *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities* 29.4 (2021).
3. Assumi, Inakali. "Sexuality and Love in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*." *Contemporary Literary Review India* 8.4 (2021): 12-25.
4. Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. "Conceptual and design thinking for thematic analysis." *Qualitative psychology* 9.1 (2022): 3.
5. Chaudhry, Zoya Jamil, and Rizwan Mustafa. "Representation of 'the other': tracing the 'otherized' segments of contemporary Indian society in Arundhati Roy's *the ministry of utmost happiness*." *South Asian Studies* 34.02 (2019): 489-504.
6. Devi, K. K. *Societal Identity: An Exploration of Ongoing Battle with Society and Self in Arundhati Roy's 'The Ministry of Utmost Happiness'* _ (2023).
7. Ganguly, Swati. "Arundhati Roy, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*." *Asiatic: IIUM Journal of English Language and Literature* 11.2 (2017): 133-137.
8. Jahan, Nusrat, and Muhammad Mushfiqur Rahman. "Collective Consciousness to Pursue Gender Equality in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*." *European Proceedings of Social and Behavioural Sciences* (2019).

¹¹Jahan, Nusrat, and Muhammad Mushfiqur Rahman. "Collective Consciousness to Pursue Gender Equality in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*." *European Proceedings of Social and Behavioural Sciences* (2019). (p. 183)

9. Suleman, Dr Danish, Abdul Halim Mohamed, and Md Firoj Ahmmed. "Political and Gender issues in Arundhati Roy's 'The Ministry of Utmost Happiness'." Suleman, D., Mohamed, AH, & Ahmmed, MF (2020). Political and Gender issues in Arundhati Roy's "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness". Indonesian Journal of Cultural and Community Development 5 (2020): 10-21070.