

A Polyphonic Study of Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

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ABSTRACT

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness, published in 2017, is the second novel of the internationally acclaimed Indian author Arundhati Roy. Roy released this novel after a long span of twenty years of her debut novel *The God of Small Things*, which was published in 1997.

Through her writings and activism Arundhati Roy has been advocating for the rights of the marginalized and suppressed sections of the society, with her special focus on contemporary Indian society. She has bravely protested against the injustices, atrocities, and discriminations that these sections of the society have been the victims of.

This paper attempts to analyse Roy's recently published novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) using Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of polyphony and dialogism developed in his book *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1963). The study will show how Roy renders equal voice and equal rights to all the marginalized sections – the underclasses, the Hijras (transgenders), the outcasts, the displaced, the minorities and so on – of the modern Indian society. The paper also argues how Roy has included numerous vernacular Indian languages and dialects to meet her political agenda.

The novel is basically the story of everyone and everything, glorifying their rights and voices to be heard. Bakhtin has studied Dostoevsky's novels as containing myriad voices, unlike the monological novels, in which the characters are merely the objects of the author's ideology, and the world is integrated or understood through a single consciousness/voice. He

asserts that Dostoevsky's novels are polyphonic and dialogic in nature. Correspondingly, Roy's characters, in the latest novel, have their individual say; are treated equally and are not dominated or suppressed by the author's consciousness or ideologies. Here the history of India is told and retold through myriad voices (polyphony): the voices of the Hijras (transgenders), the Kashmiris, struggling for the autonomy; of the farmers, the outcasts, the underclasses, and the displaced due the building of dams; of the Manipuri nationalists, asking for the revocation of the AFSPA, of the puppet journalists; of the mothers (Kashmiri) of the disappeared; of the owls, kittens, and dung beetle named GuiKyom.

Keywords: Polyphony, dialogism, marginalization, ideology, consciousness, transgender

Bakhtin's Theoretical Concepts

Monologism

Mikhail Bakhtin, one of the most important theorists of discourse in the 20th century, introduced his theoretical concepts of dialogism, polyphony, heteroglossia etc. in his books *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1963), *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* and *Rabelais and His World*. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (PDP) is a study on the fictional works of the great Russian novelist and writer Fyodor Dostoevsky.

In the *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* Bakhtin states: "a monologically understood world is an objectified world, a world corresponding to a single and unified authorial consciousness" (Hays 9). Monologism also called homophony can be defined as a single thought discourse or single voiced discourse. Here, one perspective or the authorial consciousness overtakes the entire perspectives, truths or consciousnesses. The author in such works claims a complete authority over the narrative or at least the central character becomes the mouthpiece of the author or the ultimate final authority or voice. All the other characters and the narrative revolve around the central character or a particular authority. And

therefore, there remains no place for the dialogue to exist and the dialogic process is then turned off, according to Bakhtin.

Dialogism and Polyphony

Bakhtin has put forth the concepts of dialogism and polyphony in his Book *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1963). The word polyphony is basically borrowed from music; it literally means manifold or multiple voices. Bakhtin studies Dostoevsky's novels as containing manifold voices, and calls his novels polyphonic novels. He writes: "A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices is in fact the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky's novels." (PDP 06)

According to Bakhtin, in Dostoevsky's novels each and every character has a voice of their own; they are not dependent on the author for their speech, thought and actions. There is no outside authority – religious, political, social or any other – which governs, dominates or suppresses their say; even the author doesn't have a control on them. The characters sometimes can even go against their own creator. "Dostoevsky, like Goethe's Prometheus, creates not voiceless slaves (as does Zeus), but free people, capable of standing alongside their creator, capable of not agreeing with him and even of rebelling against him." (PDP 06)

Bakhtin further states that Dostoevsky hasn't created the characters that simply become the objects of the author's consciousnesses; their image is not like that of a hero in the traditional novel. They have and represent their respective images and consciousnesses. Bakhtin Writes:

The consciousness of a character is given as someone else's consciousness, another consciousness, yet at the same time it is not turned into an object, is not closed, and does not become a simple object of the author's consciousness. In this sense the image of a character in Dostoevsky is not the usual objectified image of a hero in the traditional novel. (PDP 07)

Bakhtin's concept of dialogism (double or multi-voiced perspective) is counterposed with monologism (single thought or perspective or consciousness). In monologism one transcendental perspective or ideology or consciousness incorporates the entire arena and thus dominates the entire ideologies, perspectives and consciousnesses. Anything at odds with the transcendental perspective or ideology is deemed to be superfluous or irrelevant. The characters in a monological novel are treated as mere objects of the author's ideology or consciousness.

In contrast, dialogism—double-voiced or multi-voiced – concerns with multiple perspectives, ideologies and consciousnesses. In a dialogical novel, characters are treated as subjects of their own consciousnesses or ideologies rather than objects of the author's consciousness or ideology – as in a monological novel – and have their own final word, which then interacts with those of the others'. 'Truth' is the result of merging up of these multiple voices, perspectives or ideologies or consciousnesses. These are not author or single character centered novels, but appear to be the work of many different authors putting forth their respective viewpoints or ideologies.

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness: A Polyphonic Novel

The much awaited novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, by the Booker Award winning author Arundhati Roy, published in 2017, came forth after twenty years of her debut *The God of Small Things* (1996). The long book of near about 500 pages dedicated to 'The Unconsoled' basically takes place in Delhi, and the large part is set in Kashmir. Roy takes the readers on a long journey of many years from Delhi to Kashmir and to various other places including the forests of central India. The novel deals with various key issues prevalent specifically in the modern and postmodern India, mainly the Kashmir issue.

The novel follows the interconnected lives of the neglected, the outcast, and the shattered people, who one way or the other have been ostracized by the societies they live in. The story travels back and forth in time, includes several texts within the main text (e.g., Bhartiya's manifesto, or Tilo's Kashmiri-English Alphabet or Comrade Maase Revathy's Letter). At heart, however, the novel consists of two main narrative threads, one of which is centered in Delhi, and the other in Kashmir.

Both *The God of Small Things* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* and many of her essays are polyphonic and dialogic in both nature and structure. Roy renders equal voice and equal rights to all her characters irrespective of their caste, color, creed, social status, religion, region, ethnicity and so forth. She has treated her characters as subjects rather than as mere objects of her consciousness/ideology as is the case in monological novels. Anita Felicelli in her article "Outside Language and Power: The Mastery of Arundhati Roy's "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness," writes: "Somehow in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, her first novel in 20 years, Roy outdoes *The God of Small Things*, and this is largely because it is an even more unsettling, artistic cry against injustice. It is a polyphonic protest."

The voices raised by the socially excluded (marginalized), the outcasts, the underclasses, the mothers (Kashmiri) of the disappeared, the displaced on account of the building of dams, and the minorities, are extensively found in Roy's this novel and in many of her essays. Her novels like Dostoyevsky's too are great dialogues between the unheard voices and unmerged souls and perspectives. Each character has their own final say, but also relates to and interacts with those of the other characters. The discourse doesn't simply unfold, as in the traditional novels, but interacts.

In his review of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* Gurpreet Singh, a Canadian based journalist writes that through myriad range of characters and multiple stories that interact and

intersect, Roy presents a case that challenges the myth of a great country that is said to have benefited from neoliberalism.

“All these narratives woven together in large fiction unmask the real face of India where the dominant culture has frequently othered powerless sections of the society.” Writes Gurpreet Singh, his review titled “The Ministry Of Utmost Happiness Gives Voice To The “Other” India “

In the very first few pages of the novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, the reader confronts the mention of some recent times’ political upheavals: those of the attacks on World Trade Centre in 2001; of the Gujarat riots of 2002, that left some 2,000 Muslims dead; of the partition of India in 1947; of the Indian Parliament and the Mumbai attacks; of the Babri Masjid demolition in Ayodhya in 1992; of the imposition of emergency by Indira Gandhi in 1974 and so on.

Moreover, the contemporary history of India is told and retold by manifold voices (polyphony), through multiple range of characters and numerous stories: the voices of the hijras (transgenders or third genders); of Dalit man pretending to be a Muslim; of Kashmiris demanding secession from India, of the displaced due to the building of dams; of Indian civil servants, cold blooded killers and puppet journalists; of Adivasis (tribal populations) and of artists; of the Manipuri nationalists asking for the revocation of AFSPA; of the mothers (Kashmiri) of the disappeared; of owls and kittens and of a dung beetle named GuihKyom. The novel can be read as the story of everyone and everything, glorifying their rights and voices to be heard.

Both the margins and the marginalized speak here. The narrative of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, which is divided into 12 chapters (one of the chapters titled “The Ministry of Utmost Happiness”) and revolves largely around two major characters of the novel, Anjum

and Tilottoma, takes place in Delhi and journeys us from Delhi to Kashmir and to many other places in India.

The reader first meets Anjum, formerly Aftab, a hermaphrodite and one of the protagonists of the novel, in the first few chapters of the book. She is born with both male and female characteristics, but after surgeries turns into a transgender and becomes a very famous Hijra of Delhi; discovers her residence among the Hijras living in a place called Khwabgah (the House of Dreams), where Kulsoom Bi heads the community. However, after surviving in the Gujarat pogrom of 2002, she goes to live in a graveyard where she runs a guest house called Jannat Guest House (Paradise Guest House) and creates Jannat Funeral Services there. Anjum is a doubly marginalized character; first because she is a Muslim and secondly as a eunuch.

The novel is undoubtedly a great literary piece of work and an exemplary of postmodernist literature. With the use of some postmodern techniques like pastiche, historiographic metafiction, intertextuality, fragmentation, irony etc., Roy has excelled and shown her authorial prowess in writing such an appreciable piece of postmodernist novel. Describing and narrating while digging deep into details of various major issues in the India of today, through multiple range of characters, and making her readers know and comprehend in simple terms (uses Hindi, Urdu, Kashmiri, etc. words, phrases, sentences, verses etc. and various slangs too) what she actually wants to say and convey, she appears at her best.

Like Dostoevsky, Roy too gives her characters utmost freedom to speak for themselves and express whatever they feel like. She doesn't try to control or put her own perspectives into them; doesn't portray them as the 'voiceless slaves'. They have their own perspectives and represent their own consciousnesses. In Roy's latest novel not only the humans have their individual points of view to make but also the animals and insects have a position, power and a say. Guih Kyom the dung beetle has been raised to such level that it is

on the mission to save the sky in case it falls. “By the time they got back, the lights were all out and everybody was asleep. Everybody, that is, except for Guih Kyom the dung beetle. He was wide awake and on duty, lying on his back with his legs in the air to save the world in case the heavens fell.” (TMUH, 438)

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness is not just a single narrative but many narratives within the single narrative. Roy has unpacked the layers of politics and privilege inherent in caste, religion and gender through the novel’s multiple range of characters that includes a hijra (Anjum) from Delhi, a man from an untouchable caste who has disguised himself as a Muslim – Saddam Hussain, a Brahmin government official (Biplab), a Kashmiri resistance fighter (Musa), a media opportunist, an architect-turned-activist (Tilo) who gets involved in the Kashmiri struggle for freedom.

In her article titled “Becoming everything: constitutive impurity in Arundhati Roy’s *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*”, Carissa Ma Writes:

From time to time the birds, the beetles, the cattle become as important as the people in the narrative. At the core of Roy’s latest novel is an ethics of connectivity and multispecies entanglement. It sets out to dismantle boundaries in binary opposites: human/non-human, male/female, living/dead, killable/unkillable, grievable/ungrievable. (55)

Roy renders voice to the socially outcast community of Hijras in India through the character of Anjum, an intersex. Anjum is the representative and main voice of the community. She in herself is not a single voice; she is of many tones and expresses many things. In fact, she is many things in a single body. “When people called her names—clown without a circus, queen without a palace—she let the hurt blow through her branches, like a breeze and used the music of her rustling leaves as balm to ease her pain” (Roy 1). She

survives in peace only when “Ziauddin, the blind imam ... befriended her and began to visit her” (1). Her uniqueness as a person is emphasised by Roy as:

It doesn't matter. I'm all of them. I'm Romi and Juli, I'm Laila and Majnu. And Mujna, why not? Who says my name is Anjum? I'm not Anjum, I'm Anjuman. I'm a mehfil, I'm a gathering. Of everybody and nobody, of everything and nothing. Is there anyone else you would like to invite? Everyone's invited. (2)

Thus a reader can understand that Roy has created her character of Anjum with double voice by using Bakhtinian concept of polyphony in a single text.

Since Bakhtin believes that human language is a complex entity, he goes in favour of “multivocality, dialogism, or polyphony in a text and a text that depends on an “authoritative univocality, monologism, or monophony” cannot evoke the human experience in its complicated interrelatedness (Bazerman, 1993). Bakhtin has called Dialogism a significant and necessary element and to him it works as an agency against an authority or power structure. Now the responsibility of the readers is to go deep into these intertexts to figure out why the writer invokes these texts, how are they relevant and what functions they serve. Thus, integrating polyphonic voices in a text has ideological implications. She tells us:

A series of surgeries and hormonal pills gave Anjum a patched together body and undeepten her voice, but it restricted its resonance, coarsened its timber and gave it a peculiar, rasping quality which sometimes sounded like two voices quarrelling with each other instead of one. (Roy, 19)

In her article titled “Arundhati Roy's Novel “*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*”: A Study of Innovative Use of Translation and Intertextuality”, Ghazala Tabassum, Associate Professor, Head of English Department, Rawalpindi Women University, Rawalpindi, writes that the biological duality of Aftab/Anjum has been made stronger through the patches of

intertextuality such as transliteration of Urdu verses of classical Urdu poets “creating polyphony that replicates the hermaphroditic protagonist.”

This novel too like Roy's debut novel features polyphonic or dialogic interaction of different languages. In *The God of Small Things* Roy puts Malayalam and English against each other; in the latest novel she poses besides English multiple tongues of the Indian subcontinent against one another. The two languages Urdu and Kashmiri have been given the special preference to serve the author's political purpose.

The narrative then shifts to S. Tilottama, the English speaking woman who is in love with Musa Yeswi, a Kashmiri, who loses his family at the hands of the Indian Army when some soldiers pour bullets into them and kill them. He later on goes underground as a militant (Commander Gulrez) fighting for the independence of Kashmir.

Roy provides Tilo with two lovers one representing the state and another opposing it. In this way she presents different ways and different understanding of the Kashmir issue through Tilo. The two lovers Biplab, the high ranking government officer and supporting the government in the Kashmir issue, and Musa, who is involved in Kashmir fight for freedom, represent two voices one agreeing with the author and the other going against the author at the same time. Both voices have been given equal treatment and both are equally heard.

Tilo becomes a symbol of voice for almost all the marginalized characters in the novel. She turns to be an Ustanji (teacher) who helps other people to go on with their struggle. She takes along the kashmiri freedom fighters, hijras, Dalits, Maoists and lays down her life to fight for their justice.

All this indicates and clearly impresses upon the fact that Roy has closely and honestly observed the prevailing social, political and economic problems in contemporary India, for the most part and most intensely the Kashmir issue and the problems faced by the populace of Kashmir thereof since the time of the partition.

The novel is every way a political and social novel, and at once a love story (which too is weaved around the same themes) and an eye opener.

Conclusion

The novel is basically the story of everyone and everything, glorifying their rights and voices to be heard. Both the margins and the marginalised speak here. Bakhtin has studied Dostoevsky's novels as containing myriad voices, unlike the monological novels, in which the characters are merely the objects of the author's ideology, and the world is integrated or understood through a single consciousness/voice. He asserts that Dostoevsky's novels are polyphonic and dialogic in nature. The characters are not the objects of the author's consciousnesses or ideologies but rather the subjects of their own consciousnesses, ideologies or perspectives. Correspondingly Roy's characters, in the latest novel, have their individual say; are treated equally and are not dominated or suppressed by the author's consciousness or ideologies. Here the history of India is told and retold through myriad voices (polyphony): the voices of the Hijras (transgenders), the Kashmiris, struggling for the autonomy; of the farmers, the outcasts, the underclasses, and the displaced due the building of dams; of the Manipuri nationalists, asking for the revocation of the AFSPA, of the puppet journalists; of the mothers (Kashmiri) of the disappeared; of the owls, kittens, and dung beetle named GuiKyom.

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