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How deep shall we dig: Gender, identity and characterization in Arundhati Roy's *the ministry of utmost happiness*

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Abstract

"I am not trapped in my body," wrote Marianna Paige in her Tumblr page, "I am trapped in other people's perception of my body." What is Gender? How can we differentiate it from sex? In a feminist thought, sex refers to the fact of being either male or female. Whereas gender is the social, cultural ideas of femininity and masculinity assigned to different sexes. The paper titled "How Deep Shall We Dig: Gender, Identity and Characterization in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*" is a study on the identity and characterization of different people in the novel who have been oppressed in the past fifty years of Indian history.

Keywords: Characterization, Gender, Identity, Past, and Persistence

Introduction

D. A. Goslin in his *Handbook of Socialization Theory and Research* (1971) quote P.H. Musse who said:

It is a banal truth that an individual's sex role is the most salient of his many social roles. No other social role directs more of his overt behavior, emotional reactions, cognitive functions, covert attitudes and general psychological and social adjustments. [...] Nor is the ascription of any role more fundamental for the maintenance and continuity of society. Activities, tasks, characteristics and attitudes are assigned differently to men and women in all cultures. (707) *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) is the second fiction of Arundhati Roy which shows disco sari the identity and characterization of different people in India who have been oppressed in and by the past 40 years of Indian history. They are Anjum, a transgender; Tilottama, a feminist; Major Amrik Singh, an outrageous man; ACP Pinky, a brutal police officer; Biplab Dasgupta, a friend of Tilo and Anjum; Naga, a journalist; Musa, a militant of Kashmir; Saddam Hussain, a Dalit who changed his name to a Muslim in order to get ride off this past; Zainab, a hermaphrodite, Comrade Maase Revathy etc.

The novel begins with a note with these lines,

At magic hour, when the sun has gone but the light has not, armies of flying foxes unhinge themselves from the banyan trees in the old graveyard and drift across the city like a smoke. When the bats leave, the crows come home. Not all the din of their home coming fills the silence left by the sparrows that have gone missing, and the old white-backed vultures, custodians of the dead for more than a hundred million years, than have been wiped out. [...] Not many noticed the passing of the friendly old birds. There was so much else to look forward to. (Roy 1)

When Penguin books had announced that they are going to publish the second fiction of Arundhati Roy, the Man Booker Prize Winner, people are anxious to get it on hands. Penguin Books had commercialized the so-called brand name of Roy and the reaches to Public Libraries and book stores three days before its official releasing ceremony. But unlike *The God of Small Things* (1997), *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* doesn't satisfy her readers since they can't get into the book easily as like *The God of Small Things*, and the westerners criticized Roy on the language she used to narrate a partly bio of a nation as well as her most awaited fiction for which she had taken a long period of twenty years to get into its current form.

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One of the major reason why the readers necessitate to read is this preface note shown above, to which few readers responded that they didn't understand what she meant and its need to write in the beginning of the novel. Those lines indicate the death of vultures which eat the dead, due to the arrival of a new cow-aspirin named Diclofenac, which relaxes the muscles of the cows ease pain and produce more milk to make ice-creams which is most wanted in the city day by day. Nobody has time to notice the death or vanishing of those vultures in the graveyards. Those vultures who eat the dead are those characters in her novel. They have been marginalized, indigenized and humiliated by the society and were one day wiped out. Nobody knows where they have gone. Nobody cares them and nobody wants to know where they have gone since it is not their seed of apple. It would have stricken the minds of the readers if it is written at the end, even then Roy had given a denouement which neither tells that the novel is going to end here nor the novel ends, she left her novels to her readers to find a conclusion to the novel where at the last paragraph she wrote:

How to tell a shattered story?

By slowly become everybody

No. By slowly becoming everything. (450)

The novel begins in the graveyard where the vultures are wiped out where one of the protagonists of Roy, Anjum lives. Roy begins the First Chapter of her novel which titled Sophie Mol's Question at the end of her first novel "Where do old birds go to die?" by these words, "She lived in the graveyard like a tree." Anjum is a Muslim and a transgender. She was born as Aftab, the long-awaited son of Jahanara Begum and Mulaqat Ali. She is born as a hermaphrodite, a child born with half girl and half boy part underneath its stomach. Her life changes when she leaves the shelter of Begum and goes to the house of dreams 'Jannat' and became a member of their community. In India, hijras are those people who are biologically male, but dress and act like a woman, constitutes a culture. Now they are accepted as the third sex. They have the right to vote in India from 1994 and in 1998, India's first hijra Shabhanam Bano of forty years old took her seat in the state assembly of Madhya Pradesh.

On her eighteenth birthday, a big party was held at Jannat and Roy describes Anjum on that night in the following way:

That night she dreamed she was a bride on her wedding night. She awoke distressed to find that her sexual pleasure had expressed itself to her beautiful garment like a man's. It wasn't the first time this had happened, but for some reasons, perhaps because of the red disco sari she wore for the first time, the humiliation she felt had never been so intense. She sat in the courtyard and howled like a wolf, hitting herself on her head and between her legs, screaming with self-conflicted pain. (Roy 27)

She had a genital surgery, but her new vagina never works right. Sex became problem to her. What the hijras in this novel represent is India itself, India during independence and partition. The first chapter ends with these lines: "Miles away, in a troubled forest, a baby waited to be born" announces Indian independence.

Tilottama, another protagonist of the novel who appears after long pages, popularly known as Tilo, a former

architecture student is depicted as a lady with empowering personality traits like courage, splendor, audacity and willfulness, the qualities that Roy attributes in the definition of a feminist. The self-sufficient and self-realized aspects of Tilo can be understood through the words of Dasgupta:

Tilottama never went home for her holidays. She never said why. Nobody came looking for her. She paid her fees by working in architect's offices as a draughtsman after college hours and on weekends and holidays. She didn't live in the hostel-she said she couldn't afford it. Instead she lived in a shack in a nearby slum that was strung along the outer walls of an old ruin. (155)

Tilo cannot remain in a relationship with anyone. She first loved Musa then they broke up. Biplab says about their affair through these lines, "I was never entirely sure what the relationship between Musa and Tilo was, they were quiet with each other in company, never demonstrative. Sometimes they seemed more like siblings than lovers" (156). After few years she got a letter from Musa and she moved to Kashmir and continued the relation again. She joins the group of Kashmiri independence fighters of which Musa is the leader. She was caught by Amrik Singh and was tortured by the police. She then got married to Naga, leaves him and came to stay at Biplab's apartment for rent, then to Anjum's guest house. Her loneliness made her steal the baby from the old observatory.

Musa is quiet conservative man. He was solid, dependable, a rock where else Naga was breezy and materialistic. Both Musa and Naga at one extend was using Tilo. Musa loved her in college, later they drifted apart. Roy never mentioned the reason. Later he sends a letter requesting her help in an attack against the Kashmiri militants, where he uses her both physically and mentally and then leaves her to Naga. Naga marries Tilo to reach her heights and stop her reaching further. He tied her inside his home. Naga represents the men in the society who places a limit to women's dreams.

Major Amrik Singh is also known as Amrik Singh 'spotter' for his uncanny ability to spot the snake out of the grass, the military officer in charge of counter-insurgency operations in Kashmir. Roy calls him a putrid apple. He widely tortures the victims and suspects that he gets hold of:

One day he arrested a well-known lawyer and human rights activist Jalib Quadri in front of his wife, but the arrest was not registered. A few days later Quadri's body showed up in a sack floating down the water. It was in a terrible condition – skull smashed in, eyes gouged out, and so on. (175)

No one questioned him. He is portrayed as an outrageous, splenetic military officer who really lives up to the expectations of a male chauvinist. A female version of Amrik Singh is ACP Pinky Sodhi, a brutal interrogator who often exceeded her brief because she was exorcising demons of her own. She was charming and pretty, truly a beauty with the heart of a beast. She had exercised some restraints and unleashed herself completely for interrogation. She has a personal revenge on the militants because her twin brother Balbir Singh Sodhi, a senior police officer, was shot to death by the militants in Sopore when he was out on his morning jog. ACP Pinky is an exaggeration of female chauvinist. Biplab describes ACP Pinky's stubbornness in one of the chapters, "It's just a haircut, she said. The haircut – the shave must have been ACP Pinky Sodhi's idea. A police woman's therapy for what she saw as treason – sleeping with the enemy, her brother's killers. Pinky Sodhi liked to keep things simple" (186).

Biplab Dasgupta, one of Tilo's collegemates is also named as Garson Hobart (a character enacted by him in a college play) by Tilo. He is one of the visitor's at Anjum's guest house. He is the one who gifted the house to her. He is married to Chitra whom he never comes to like. He finds pleasure in the company of Anjum and her friends. At that point he may consider as a homosexual. Biplab had said in the novel that he loves Naga, more than Tilo and he is proud of Naga having lot of fans in the college. To an extend Zainab, Saddam Hussain and Usthad Hameed Khan, the musician who taught Aftab Hindustani classical music, can be included in the category of Queer. Zainab was taken to the house of dreams by Anjum, when she was a small child left near a temple. Anjum guesses that somebody had left her in the street from finding out that she is a hermaphrodite. Saddam is a Hindu Dalit who changed his name to a Muslim in order to erase his dark past. He fell in love with Zainab and marries her with Anjum's permission. Jannat guest house had celebrated their wedding as a grand event in Delhi.

Maase Revathy is a minor character in the novel who plays an important role in the lives of Anjum and Tilo. She is the mother of Miss Jebeen the Second whom Anjum and Tilo considers as their daughter. The story of Revathy appears in the last chapter of the novel. Comrade Revathy is a Maoist from east Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh, a victim of Sexism. Roy had blatantly narrated the letter of Masse Revathy which highlights the last chapter of her magnum opus:

I thought they would kill me like Padmakka and Laxmi but they said 'Don't worry Blackie we will let you go. You must go and tell them what we did to you. You are a great heroine. You supply them with bullets, malaria medicines, food, tooth brushes, all that we know. How many innocent girls have you send to join your party? You are spoiling everyone. Now you go and marry someone. Settle down quietly. But first we will give you some marriage experience.' They kept on burning me and cutting me. But I am not crying at all. 'Why don't you scream? Your great leaders will come and save you. You people don't scream.' Then one man forced open my mouth and one man put his penis in my mouth. I could not breathe. I thought I would die. They kept putting water on my face. Then all raped me many times. One is Udaya's father. Which, how can I say? I was unconscious. When I waked again I was bleeding everywhere, the door was open. They were outside smoking. I could see my sari. I slowly took it. The back door was open slightly and outside was a paddy field. They saw me running, they ran after me then they said 'Leave it, let her go.'" (422)

Revathy was killed in a Maoist attack in Andhra Pradesh. Revathy, Anjum, Tilo represents those suppressed people in India especially the life of women during emergency. One can see people like Anjum, Tilo, Revathy, ACP Pinky, Amrik Singh, Biplab, Naga, Musa, Saddam in our society in the past, present as well as future. The novel doesn't have an end, doesn't have a beginning, it just happened in a media res where Roy through many people in the novel narrates the life of one another as a way of storytelling where one tells the story of the another. One thing we can see in the lives of the characters are a lack of someone or something which they consider as their best-loved. Roy through these characters narrates the conflicts and riots in India which are still going on, which cannot end, as Nimmo said to Anjum:

Do you know why God made hijras? It was an experiment. He decided to create something, a living creature that is incapable of happiness. So, he made us. [...] What makes a normal man unhappy? Price rise, children's school admissions, husband's beatings, wife's cheatings, Hindu-Muslim riots, Indo-Pak war. Outside things will settle down soon. But for the hijras it is inside them. It will never settle down. It can't. (23)

Nimmo's words hints not only the precarious lives of transgenders in India, the Others; but many. Roy has portrayed numerous scenes of death, war, attacks, communal riots, massacres, which traces its roots back to independence, partition, emergency, assassination of Indira Gandhi, Gujarat riots, 9/11 in Kashmir, Bhopal tragedy, atrocities against dalits, Gau-Rakshaks etc. in the novel expresses her political views out of the norms of the society as a narrative story teller. Though the central characters in the novel are a transgender and a woman, Roy highlights the struggles, exploitations, tortures undergone by an independent individuals whether it is a man or a woman through her bio fiction on life in India.

Conclusion

Gender plays an important role in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Gender is considered as the primary way through which one person is identified and evaluated by the society. The novel tried to bring up the sufferings and life of different peoples lives in a society. One cannot be ignored in the name of his gender or sex. Our parents say that one's character is formed from his family. He or she may be recognised as the son or daughter or grandchildren of this man, that man. Likewise, in bhavas, the sthayibhavas are formed from ones vasana and samskara. There is one additional one i.e., chindha. i.e., one's character is formed from his/her taste, culture and thoughts, not from his/her gender or sex, which marks one's identity in a society. Hence Gender is the reflection of our culture and thoughts.

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