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Social Exclusion: A Subaltern Perspective in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

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Abstract

Postcolonial Indian society appears to have achieved political freedom but has yet to get social freedom. The modern, democratic Indian society is not yet free as for as the caste system, the unequal distribution of wealth, the safety and security of women, minorities and children, and so on are concerned. The term social exclusion or social marginalisation means ostracization or alienation of an individual or a community as a whole on the base of wealth, social status, caste, class, religion, gender etc. This paper offers a critique of Arundhati Roy's second published novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* in 2017 to understand the integration of the theme of social exclusion and subalternation in the novel. The novel is fundamentally a painful story of everyone and everything oppressed and suppressed and drifting to the margins of society by the powerful class. The narrative is dedicated to 'The Unconsoled' such as the Hijras, the outcasts, women, the Kashmiris, the disappeared, the displaced so on and so forth. The novel transports us on a journey that spans many years, from the claustrophobic Old Delhi neighbourhoods to the escalating new metropolis and beyond, to the Kashmir Valley and the forests of central India, where war is concord and concord is war, and where, occasionally, normality is avowed.

The concept of social exclusion is said to have come into use only recently. The term is widely used in Europe and is believed to have been first used in France. René Lenoir (1927 – 2017), a Centrist French civil servant and politician, has been given the credit for coining the term. Social exclusion or social marginalisation means discriminating against others on the basis such as gender, ethnicity, wealth, and age. It can also be defined as "the process through which individuals or groups are wholly or partially excluded from full participation in the society within which they live" (Deakin et al., 1995). It happens when people are completely or partially excluded from engaging in their community's economic, social, and political life due to their social status, category, or group membership. In India, caste, ethnicity, faith, gender, and disability are all factors that contribute to social exclusion. It is used across disciplines such as education, sociology, psychology, literature, politics, and economics.

René Lenoir, as Secrétaire d'Etat a l'Action Sociale of the French Government, stated about the socially excluded in the following words:

> …mentally and physically handicapped, suicidal people, aged invalids, abused children, substance abusers, delinquents, single parents, multi-problem households, marginal, asocial persons, and other social 'misfits'. (See Silver (1995), p. 63. See also Foucauld (1992)

As Hilary Silver notes, the following items must be on the list of "a handful of the things the literature states persons may be barred from": the welfare state, education, skills, and cultural capital; citizenship and legal equality; democratic participation; public goods; the nation or the dominant race; family and sociability; humanity, respect, fulfilment, and

understanding. A livelihood, secure, permanent employment; earnings; property, credit, or land; housing; minimal or prevalent consumption levels (Silver, p. 60).

The feelings of disdain, degradation, devaluation, disparagement, and stigma that excluded people experience may have an impact on their health. The response to exclusion varies depending on the reason for it. If the exclusion is based on economics, there may be demands for wealth redistribution; if the exclusion is based on identity, there may be demands for recognition and appreciation. Protesters took to the streets during the Arab Spring in 2011 for demanding respect from the police and the leaders.

Many women are economically marginalized or socially excluded. People who are discriminated against because of their age, caste, descent, disability, ethnic origin, migrant status, race, sexual orientation, social status, or region are often victims of many forms of discrimination. People are often socially excluded in any society. However, the groups affected and the severity of prejudice, as well as the types of social exclusion, differs from one community to the next. In some ways, gender inequality may be the greatest development obstacle, while racial general discrimination may pose the greatest challenge in another. Disabled elder ladies from ethnic minority groups, for example, who are discriminated against on multiple levels, are also the worst.

Michel Foucault on Social Exclusion

Michel Foucault states:

> In the Middle ages, exclusion hit the leper, the heretic. Classical culture excluded by means of the General Hospital, the Zuchthaus, the Workhouse, all institutions which were derived from the leper colony. I wanted to describe the modification of a structure of exclusion (Foucault, 1996, p. 8).

He further argues:

> Once leprosy had gone, and the figure of the leper was no more than a distant memory, these structures still remained. The game of exclusion would be played again, often in these same places, in an oddly similar fashion two or three centuries later. The role of the leper was to be played by the poor and by the vagrant, by prisoners and by the 'alienated', and the sort of salvation at stake for both parties in this game of exclusion is the matter of this study. (Foucault, 2006, p. 6).

The central idea is that the way such societies have been built in the modern ages tends to exclude people who are seen as not fitting into the society's basic mission. People have been constituted as individuals in and by authority, according to Foucault, which means that they are in different kinds of strategic relationships with one another as individuals and representatives of social groups. The way the world is viewed and how people are socialised through social networks are also related. This is an important feature of exclusion dynamics. There are several different ways to exclude people, and many of them have to do with status and stigmatization.

Racism, classism, misogyny, and homophobia are some of examples of these. Arundhati Roy, a contemporary novelist, writer, and activist, instantly associated herself with nonfiction after she won the Booker Prize for her novel first *The God of Small Things*,

published in 1997. She has a great concern upon the never-ending struggle between power and powerlessness, which has remained a recurring theme in her writings. She has been able to understand it completely and has widely written and spoken on it. Roy has remained true to her values, ideas, and faith throughout her career. She has done a good job of it, dispelling the self-righteous patriotic myths about Kashmir and exposing the evil plans of US imperialism to seize control of people's hearts and minds and the decisions of governments around the world. She has also hammered at the conspiracy to evict the naturally lawful owners of lands and resources in the tribal areas through the use of Naxalism.

Depiction of Social Exclusion in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

The long-awaited novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is another masterpiece by Arundhati Roy that primarily deals with the socio-political issues of modern Indian society. The narrative features everybody and is about everybody who has been neglected, suppressed, and socially excluded by the powerful classes. The novel mainly features the transgender community, women, children, tribal population, Kashmiris, dalits, etc. and talks about how they face multiple forms of suppression and oppression and how they have been socially, politically, geographically, and economically excluded. Roy becomes their savior and gives them a space to make their demonstrations and demands heard and addressed. She has tried to create an environment for these disadvantaged people.

Transgender people are classified as a third gender and termed neither men nor women. They have been facing social exclusion and alienation and also identity crises for a long time because they can't define themselves in conventional male or female terms. They are dismissed by their families as well as by society. They are marginalised everywhere and are forced to live the life of an "other". They are restricted both in education and in public spaces, and because of certain limitations, they choose to live a life of seclusion. They are oppressed people, and as a result, face legal, social, and economic challenges. They don't have good access to education, health care, or public spaces. These people do not fit into society's standards because they have been deprived of their social rights. They still have an identity crisis in this stereotypical culture which is centered on the stereotypical relationship between men and women. They are unable to accommodate themselves, and their families to are turned away by society. They are deprived of psychological, physical, and political freedom almost everywhere.

The issue of gender discrimination in The *Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is depicted by Roy through the character of Anjum, who is born as Aftab, but soon is discovered to have Hijra tendencies, and after many surgeries become Anjum, leaves her home and begins to live with the Hijra community in the Khawbgah (house of dreams). After discovering that her child (Anjum) was not a normal boy, Anjum's mother even tried to hide it from her husband. The child's sexual identity shocks and terrifies the mother. She began reacting quite differently and became very disappointed as they had been impatiently waiting for the son to be born, but to her surprise, it was not a 'normal' baby. She wasn't able to make her eyes and heart believe what has happened to her. "There, in the abyss, spinning through the darkness,

everything she had been sure of until then, every single thing, from the smallest to the biggest, ceased to make sense to her" (*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 8).

In Urdu, the only language she knew, all things, not just living things but all things – carpets, clothes, books, pens, musical instruments– had a gender. Everything was either masculine or feminine, man or woman. Everything except her baby. Yes, of course she knew there was a word for those like him– Hijra. Two words actually, Hijra and Kinnar. But two words do not make a language (*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 8).

At home too Aftab was hated or excluded just because he was born like this. He began to attend music classes and there faced the brunt of teasing and mocking by his mates once they discovered a little difference in him and them. "He's a She. He's not a He or a She. He's a He and a She. She-He, He-She Hee! Hee! Hee!" (*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, 12). When the bullying there became intolerable to Aftab, he stopped attending the music lessons and refused to return to school. Since others expect him to fit into the traditional structure, he becomes physically and mentally disturbed. He possessed a body that blurred the lines between male and female. The tale of Aftab highlights the difficulties of living in a culture dominated by essentialist gender explanations. Aftab, a woman trapped in a man's body, accepts his/her female identity in the hopes of realising his/her true self. According to Judith Butler, people need not regard gender to be passively determined but "it is a process of constructing ourselves" (Butler, 31).

Then the reader comes across another major character Saddam Hussain who is born Dayachand, and becomes Anjum's first guest at Jannat Guest House. He is born into a low-caste, dalit family, but after his father is mercilessly murdered by an unruly mob for being suspected of killing a cow, converts to Islam. He faces alienation and exclusion in society on the base of his caste. A social structure like this doesn't allow him to have his voice heard freely and fairly. He can be termed as the representation of a subaltern in the novel.

Another major character of the novel is Musa Yeswi, a Kashmiri, who turns to militancy after his wife, Arifa, and his daughter, Miss Jabeen, are killed by the security forces. He is the representation of the Kashmiris being put to the margins and being silenced and forced to leave their homes and the life of peace to become rebels. Musa then goes underground and dies there for the cause of Kashmir. He is the representation of the subaltern Kashmiris.

We come across another socially oppressed character in the name of Tillotama, called Tilo, who some readers believe is the representation of Roy herself. The life story of Tilo is told in narrative form. Roy emphasises the internal struggles of transgender persons in Anjum's narrative and paints a picture of an environment filled with turmoil in Tilo's life. Through Tilo's life, the miserable existence of the Kashmiri people is intricately portrayed. Her search for Kashmiri activist Musa gets her into trouble.

She has witnessed the brutal treatment of citizens by military officers. They shave her head to interview her when she survives it. It's a comment on how the government implements and justifies its gender-based policies. She vows to never let her hair grow long again in an effort to get back at him. Her existence in the world of fiction challenges some assumptions

about the roles that men and women play in the public and private spheres. As she broke free from the constraints of family life and transitioned from the private to the public sector as an activist, her social and political identity began to take shape. According to Linda Alcoff, women's subjectivity and identity determine their status. Men and women can only be distinguished by the physical processes of conception, childbirth, and breastfeeding. Alcoff believes that biological reproduction is:

> The basis of a variety of social segregations, it can engender differential forms of embodiment experienced throughout life, it can generate a wide variety of effective responses, from pride, delight, shame, guilt, regret or great relief from having successfully avoided reproduction. (Alcoff 172)

Conclusion

Thus, even by a cursory glance at the novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness,* it can be said that the novel depicts the voices of the subaltern people and depicts people who are socially and politically excluded by the powerful classes, upper castes, the state forces of the modern society. Arundhati Roy on one hand narrates the stories of the victims of social exclusion and on another provides them space to express their say independently. She again looks to be very much concerned about 'The Unconsoled' as she had been previously in her other writings and also in her talks.

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