



A Haven for the Subaltern: The Implication of the Jannat House in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

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Abstract

The Institution of a guest house for the subsistence of social outcasts is the prime precept of The Ministry of Utmost Happiness. Anjum's decision to set up Jannat beside a graveyard demonstrates the powerless situation of the ostracised people in society. Roy fashioned Jannat as an abode where outsiders are treated as insiders. The affluent section of the society is merely outlaws at Jannat. By using this model, Roy exhibits the collective trauma experienced by the subalterns. She convenes a community for the helpless lot. The characters and their individual tryst with trauma scrutinise the struggles and challenges of the non-conformists. The writer's resolution to embrace the panorama of subcultures that exist within the subaltern community widens the boundaries of subaltern studies. The community at Jannat endure the challenges of life by a shared understanding of trauma as well as life.

Keywords: Subaltern, Trauma, Roy, Jannat, Outcasts.

The collective trauma undergone by the subaltern community functions as the crux of Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. The systemic discrimination, dearth of representation and want of belongingness that defines the subaltern existence is delineated by Roy with the acute depiction of individual traumatic histories. Transcommunity, orphans, Kashmiris, elderlies and women acquire delegation in this paradigm. The trials and tribulations of individual characters can easily be misconstrued as isolated ordeals. Therefore, a dialogue detailing the repressed socio-political significance of such experiences unfolds a plethora of concerns that stipulate the pathetic situation of the disadvantaged section of the society.

All the major characters of the novel are subaltern archetypes. Being shunned by the society, they suffer in silence. The general public compels them to believe that they are eccentric and unnatural. Their quotidian struggles are so gruesome that they don't have the luxury to feel vulnerable. Moreover, they are politically and socially oppressed so that they are never heard by the people at large. This model of institutionalised discrimination also ensures that the underprivileged people remain underprivileged for the generations to come. History sidelines them to nobodies and the metanarrative diminishes them to minor characters. Roy turn the tables by bringing the historically paltry characters to the forefront



and giving them the reins to construct a narrative of their own. She questions the readers why the subalterns are always “remembered as the forgotten ones.” (Roy 47)

The prime locales of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* also substantiate the novel’s theme of power relations. The Khwabgah, Jannat and Kashmir are all home for the oppressed. The conventional society perceives them as dangerous. The residents of these settings are almost trapped there because they are deemed too outlandish for the outside world. They form small communities within themselves for safety and sanity. Nevertheless, the members of the outside world are unaware of the plight of these people. Since they don’t have first-hand knowledge about these people, the general public conjectures about their whereabouts. Hence, the dominant narrative around the disadvantaged people is tinged with prejudice and hypocrisy.

Anjum’s gateway to the subaltern community is commenced by the knowledge that she doesn’t fit in. Her identity as a ‘hijra’ indirectly deems her as an outcast. Her parents treat her as a faulty creation of God which needs urgent rectification. She feels ashamed of her physique and her feelings. Anjum reconvenes normality in the company of the trans community. While they are mortified and chastened by cops and other public servants, they establish a safe space to protect themselves from the evil of the outside world. Khwabgah is the set for this shared reality.

Roy elucidates the Khwabgah as “the House of Dreams” (Roy 21). The transition from Aftab to Anjum takes place in and around this place. She embraces her innate femininity in the company of Kulsoom Bi and others. The very realisation that she can be true to the core of her identity makes her feel at ease. Still, Roy fashions Khwabgah as an interim getaway from the hegemonic system. According to Ustad Kulsoom Bi, it is a place where “blessed people, came with their dreams that could not be realized in the Duniya” (Roy 48). Khwabgah only moulds Anjum to be a transperson. It doesn’t equip her with the ability to confront the social challenges that are waiting for a person of her sexual orientation. Inside the safe walls of Khwabgah, the members are blissfully unaware of the social and political hegemony that is imposed on transgenders and other subaltern communities. Bombay Silk, Bulbul, Razia, Heera, Baby, Nimmo, Mary and Gudiya are all victims of this ignorance. They don’t voluntarily venture beyond their territories to understand the truth. Nonetheless, Anjum makes headway by involving herself in the Gujarat conflict and eventually gets traumatically wounded.

On the other hand, Jannat is expounded by Roy as a “Paradise” (Roy 60). Unlike Khwabgah, it is not a temporary retreat that exists within the conventional society. In fact, it is an alternate reality with utopian facets. Anjum acknowledges the other-worldly angle of Jannat when she proudly declares to the media that “Hum doosri Duniya se aaye hain” (Roy 91) which means they are from a different world. It is a place where subalterns are treated the way they also wanted to be treated. Religion, caste, gender, economic status and family name is inconsequential in this space. None of the residents are questioned about their past which precipitated their need to seek shelter in a graveyard. They are not forced to spell out their traumatic history because they are embraced by the Jannat house despite all that. Yet, there is



a silent collective recognition of the fact that they are all psychologically wounded by the knowledge that they are alienated by the society. Roy explains this standpoint explicitly in this way:

Their wounds were too old and too new, too different, and perhaps too deep, for healing. But for a fleeting moment, they were able to pool them like accumulated gambling debts and share the pain equally, without naming the injuries or asking which was whose. (Roy 276)

While Khwabgah is a harbour for the ‘hijras’, Jannat is a haven for the subalterns of all kinds. The members of the Jannat house are from divergent backgrounds. Imam Ziauddin is a senior citizen who is estranged by his son and his family. Saddam Hussain became an outcast when his father was killed by Hindu chauvinists. Tilottama is an unconventional woman who fell in love with a Kashmir separatist. Similarly Zakir Mian, Nimmo Gorakhpuri and Anjum have individual horrific pasts that are unfathomable for others. Yet, they cling on to each other so as to survive the horrendous reality that they are exposed to. None of them interpret somebody’s struggles as less grave. Unconditional support and unwavering affirmation are the mottos of Jannat.

A group of social outcasts establishing a guest house beside the graveyard is arguably twenty first centuries’ most accurate metaphor to express the gruesome situation of the underprivileged section of the society. In this way, Roy implies that the subaltern people are perceived by the larger society as dead- like. They are considered so impertinent that the social and political machinery has no record of their existence. The imagery of the graveyard also ratifies the resemblance between the haunted ghosts and the residents of Jannat. They are like condemned souls who are still suffering for past sins. Therefore Roy argues that Anjum “wasn’t living in the graveyard, she was dying in it” (Roy 59).

Roy reimagines Jannat as a portal between the dead and the living. According to Hirschberger, “Trauma Is of Death, and Death Creates Meaning” (6). This validates the idea that the past trauma of the members of Jannat has brought them closer to death. They have already ventured beyond the limits of human life and the limitations it impedes. At Jannat, the heavenly abode and earthly orb concurs to exemplify the philosophy of life and death. This emphasises the mutability of life and inevitability of death.

Nevertheless, Jannat is not just a guest house, it is a funeral parlour. It is the site where the troubled souls achieve absolution. This also supports Jannat’s innuendo as a mythical heaven. But this paradise is exclusively for the subalterns. Jannat Funeral Service only bury the dead bodies which are declined by the society. And the burial system at the Jannat surpasses all religious superstitions and beliefs. Tilo conducted a funeral service for her mother Maryam Ipe by chanting verses from Shakespeare’s *Henry V*. Being a woman, she is not allowed to witness burials but she attends it regardless of that. In this way, Roy invents a prototype milieu for the oppressed people which follow avant- garde practices. Unlike historical exercises of faith, the burial is not carried out by segregating people into breeds and deciding funeral customs. It is done on the basis of the departed soul’s predilections. Thus, Roy reclaims power from the dead and hands it over to the living. Mythical customs and its



implications take a backseat in this situation. Hence, Jannat metaphorically showcases the tumbling down of the hegemonic system.

While Khwabgah rests in the illusory sphere and Jannat in the celestial sphere, Kashmir lies in the Hadean sphere. It showcases nightmarish qualities. The citizens of Kashmir spend every moment of their life at the edge of danger. There is a “faint, acrid smell of gunpowder hanging in the air” (Roy 162) all year around. At one point, Aijaz reveals to Naga that everybody on both sides of the border is monetising the lives of Kashmiris. He underlines this as the reason behind the interminable Kashmir civil battles. The hegemonic system utilizes civil disputes for political stability and economic benefits. The men and women of Kashmir who are tyrannised by the system are uncared for. Nobody genuinely cares about their safety and welfare. In such a framework, the subalterns are forced to fend for themselves. Even that is not working in their favour.

Roy represents the quotidian life at Kashmir with spine- chilling details. She reports that the civil struggle in Kashmir is no longer for liberty; it is for dignity, the dignity to lead a peaceful life. Every single person who is involved in this feud is perpetrating violence in one way or another. So there is no right and wrong in this modus operandi. Roy sympathises with Kashmir separatists when she says that they are mere people who are fighting back because that is their only survival strategy. Here, citizens of Kashmir are perceived as subalterns who have no right over their own lives. For them, fending is a way of life.

In this scuffle to survive, they don't have the luxury to lead a normal life and form healthy relationships. Musa and Arifa's marriage broke as a consequence of this. Even a small child like Miss Jebeen cannot afford to hold on to the innocence and inanity that her age generously thrusts on her. As a kid, she sees violence more than most people see in their entire lives. Eventually she surrenders to death. Death and distress is depicted as routine ingredients of everyday life at Kashmir. Roy portrays a harrowing scene where mothers are perplexed about what to cook if at all their sons get back home safely. She presents a lifestyle where returning home without any damage is considered as luck. The writer refuses to limit the narrative to one single character. She presents innumerable stories of Kashmiris through letters which exhibits the traumatic reality in Kashmir. She displays these narratives at times with a pinch of dark humour which heightens the tragic elements of the novel. The misery is too mundane that it is even humorous.

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness renders Kashmir as “the Valley of death” (Roy 298). The living lot in this locale is spiritually and emotionally dead. It displays instances of diabolical qualities. Physical death is the only form of peace and contentment they can ever aspire for. It is almost an escape from the agony of being alive. In Christian doctrine, hell is a place where sinners are punished for eternity. The plights of Kashmiris are very similar. Roy sparks questions about the genesis of their suffering. She also hints about the “intergenerational transmission of trauma” (Rothberg 4) that is inflicted on them. The writer also underscores that the Kashmiris are psychologically wounded. Even when the conflict ends, the progeny will continue to suffer because of the ripples of traumatic legacies. There is no scope for purgation as far as the people of Kashmir are concerned.



“Over time collective trauma becomes the epicentre of group identity, and the lens through which group members understand their social environment” (Hirschberger 2). The trauma that is triggered as a consequence of oppression can also be potentially harmful. A life at the disposal of hegemony can kindle an urge to take charge of their life. This instinct can make them perpetrators of violence in the future. This is the part of the reason why Kashmiris are conventionally misconstrued as terrorists. Yet, the general public never takes the pain to understand the root of their suffering which metamorphoses into violence. The hegemonic system in place takes advantage of this to throw shade at the subaltern and present them as people who don't deserve sympathy. Such a system discriminates them and confines them to the cycle of subjugation. This method of labelling them as a vicious lot triggers collective trauma as well.

Collective trauma can also instill an inferiority complex. Nimmo delineates hijras as lab rats who are “incapable of happiness” (Roy 24). Anjum sees her life as an out- turn of “Butchers’ Luck” (Roy 56). At one point, group of smack addicts tries to abuse her by stating that she is a hijra and Muslim. Even then, she blames herself and her transidentity. This marks the surge of the remnants of the collective trauma which makes them internalize their subservient status in the society. They feel that they are not entitled for even basic human decency.

The transcommunity is hegemonised by a “tripartite system of colonialism” (Mandal 2) as well. Anjum compares the daily life of a transgender to the adversities of the Emergency period. They are interrogated, manhandled and castigated on an everyday basis. In a woeful Flyover episode, Roy describes how the members of the Khwabgah were tortured by the police. They were propelled out of their vans and was forced to run in the dead of the night after being thrashed for no reason. This horrific scene is trivialised by Anjum as a normality. The prejudice associated with the transcommunity makes them even more vulnerable to such intolerances.

Like Anjum, Tilo is ill-treated because of multiple impulses. She was born out of wedlock and was conveniently pronounced as an orphan. Even though Maryam Ipe, her biological mother, adopts her later on, she grows up as an orphan who is offered a grand life out of sympathy. This inferiority complex is the bedrock of Tilo’s trauma. Her relatives and friends treat her as a second- class citizen. Tilo’s affair with a Kashmir separatist makes her exposed to all sorts of discrimination. When captured, the public servants cut her hair short as a mark of punishment. But above all, her womanhood endangers her safety. Her unconventional behaviour and attitude gets widely criticised. Her status first as a single woman and then as single mother attracts attention. Promiscuous men utilize this ill- repute as a rationale to make sexual advances at her. It is this cycle of subjugation that prompted her to join the subaltern community at Jannat.

Tilo is conscious about the repercussions of the orphan- identity. She adopts Miss Jebeen the Second because she sees herself in her. This is a common impulse in the character graph of all the subaltern characters. They relate themselves to other oppressed people and take steps to help them even if they themselves are struggling to survive. Anjum’s decision to



adopt Zainab also springs from this standpoint. She raises Zainab by providing her with all the love and care. Even when Zainab alienates her, Anjum doesn't condemn her. She knows how it is to be labelled as the careless child from her own experience. As Zainab grows into a young lady, she appreciates the magnanimity of Anjum. Zainab's fondness for animals is a ramification of her gratitude. From her childhood, she surrounds herself with animals and looks after them with meticulous attention. Later on, she establishes "a zoo -a Noah's Ark of injured animals" (Roy 303) alongside Jannat. Zainab's zoo is more or less a microcosm of the Jannat. It is a home for animals that are subdued and abandoned by society. Like the residents of Jannat, the animals of Zainab's zoo are wounded. Roy accentuates the theme of power relations repeatedly to underline that the novel is an ode to the struggles of the subaltern.

Maryam Ipe stands in sharp contrast to other characters in the novel because she is not a cast off. In fact, she is from an aristocratic Syrian lineage. According to Roy, Tilo is the "fictional child of Ammu and Velutha in *The God of Small Things*, had their story ended differently" (Roy qtd. in Lau and Mendes 8). Presuming Velutha as a father of Tilo widens the discussion concerning Maryam's trauma. Her conflict with caste hierarchy might be rooted in this account. Her refusal to acknowledge the father of her child might be an extension of her fear to accept that she slept with a Dalit man.

Even though Maryam is not a Dalit, she can be a sufferer of 'collective trauma'. According to Rothberg, "not all traumatized subjects are victims...perpetrators can also be traumatized" (9). The hypocrisy that has been shoved on her psyche is impossible to recover from. This tamper with her emotional substructure and she becomes mentally ill as a consequence. Even though she never confronts her trauma in her lifetime, it surges by itself on her deathbed. Her psychosis at the hands of chronic obstructive lung disease (COPD) can also be understood as a corollary of her mental illness. At the hands of this delirium, she becomes a caste- inquisitor. Maryam queries about the caste and sub- caste of every single person she set her eyes on. She even abuses them by calling casteist cunt words. Maryam is a highly educated woman who is also revered as a humanitarian. For somebody of her standing, it is strange that she suddenly becomes this vulgar. According to Roy, this is a consequence of our hypocrisy. Hence, the psychosis marks the Maryam's surge of repressed trauma is a repercussion of her guilt for yielding for a Dalit man. Her persona as a social activist might be a reparation of sorts for her guilt conscience. This reveals instances of prejudices that are concealed within human conscience as a result of 'historical memory'.

Despite her high- born status, Maryam is also a woman who is subjugated by society. She lacks the station to fall in love with a man of her choice. This concept correlates itself to the love laws that Roy identifies in *The God of Small Things*. She renounces all sorts of impediments that take power away from the individuals. She aspires for a society where men and women have the liberty to live lives on their terms. The hegemony of all sorts that delimits the operation freewill is potentially minacious.

Like Maryam, Daya Chand also has unresolved past traumas. His father's death at the hands of Hindu chauvinists illustrates that the disadvantaged people are perceived as lesser than animals. Daya Chand's father was murdered because it was allegedly reported that he



killed a cow. This instance reveals the uncharitable nature of the post- modern society. Daya Chand who witnessed the murder of his father later becomes an admirer of Saddam Hussain. He becomes so adulated by his courage that he starts to call himself Saddam Hussain. This veneration springs from his own inability to avenge his father's death. Roy presents the story of Saddam to depict the incongruousness that exists within the subaltern identity. There is no ordinance that brackets the extent of subaltern experience. The ordeals are diverse and distinct.

Roy explicates the subaltern status of Muslims in the Indian standpoint to widen the scope of subaltern studies. Ironically, Saddam uses his original name in few instances so as to avoid the bigotry treatment that he receives as a consequence of his Muslim fake name. The stuff addicts declare to Anjum that Muslims belong either in Pakistan or in the graveyard. The incident mirrors the inclination of post- modern society to exercise control over the minority. This yearning also traces humanity's decadence into the primitive instincts. Here, the sophistication of the conventional society is divulged as mere ostentatiousness.

Jannat doesn't exist in this plane. It is uncanonical in convention and execution. Jannat is an imaginative rendition of Roy's socialist ideals. She institutes a community for the socially suppressed. It is an autonomous body which provides economic and emotional sustenance for the disadvantaged. Its utopian attributes metaphorically crucify the atrocious nature of present society. It showcases aspirational traits that should be a benchmark for the future of humanity.

Unlike the members of the general public, Jannat residents have complex mental make-up. Because of the trauma that is triggered as a result of their subaltern existence, they suffer from "unmet dependency needs" (Van Nieuwenhove et al. 12). Yet they manage to create a safe space for each other. They venture beyond their psychological issues and champion the humanitarian pneuma. They are capable enough to comprehend each other's struggles without communication because their tenderness for each other is not conditional. Roy describes Nimmo Gorakhpuri's and Anjum's first meeting as a rebound of star crossed lovers. Other than their shared reality of being a transgender and a subaltern, they are complete strangers to each other. Yet, they display familial affinity towards each other. This is true for every resident of Jannat. They feel at home only in the company of each other.

According to Roy, the members of the Jannat house never choose to live in the graveyard. "It was the tide" (Roy 73) of 'collective trauma' that advanced them to this place. She portrays the crux of the life at Jannat in this way:

Once you have fallen off the edge like all of us have... you will never stop falling.
And as you fall you will hold on to other falling people. The sooner you understand that the better. (Roy 72)

Roy's working model for subalterns is thus instituted on collective healing. For the underprivileged lot, Jannat is *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. This modus operandi functions without the interference of capitalist and hegemonic machinery. It is a community instituted by the disadvantaged people for the welfare of the disadvantaged people. The



founder of the Jannat has established this place without any Machiavellian agendas. In this way, Jannat is also a macrocosm of an ideal democratic state.

To conclude, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is a paradigm of subaltern narrative. The plot, characters, settings, conflict and resolution partakes the subaltern understanding of life. It is not a parochial account of the destitute which is written in order to engender sentimentalism. It is a true to life depiction of the unvoiced struggles, unsanitised feelings and unfiltered condition of underprivileged people. Roy encompasses multifarious sub-cultures that exist within the subaltern community and brings out the factors that unite them as a unit. Transgenders, orphans, Kashmiris, Muslims, Women and elderlies find representation in this framework. Her characters are living, breathing epitomes of subaltern archetypes. The nuts and bolts of the hegemonic system is explored without any sign of prejudice. Similarly, the fundamentals of the subaltern experience are also symbolically represented through the choice of settings. The Khwabgah, Jannat and Kashmir records the variant existential dilemmas that are faced by the disadvantaged lot. While the Khwabgah presents a short-term retreat from the terrors of the subaltern existence, Kashmir depicts the egregious peak of the subaltern experience. Jannat on the other hand, is a permanent working model for the survival and sustenance of the underprivileged people. Roy models Jannat based on her socialist philosophy of democracy and life. It is an epicentre of the subaltern discourse where centuries of collective trauma are absolved. Roy fashions this subaltern utopia as something the conventional society should aspire to be. She also censures the treatment of subalterns as dead-like. She reforms the grand narrative depiction of the disadvantaged people as nugatory and paltry. Roy shoulders the responsibility of being a mouthpiece to the subalterns and substantiates their horrendous quotidian life. She kindles readers to empathise with people who suffer. In this way, she reclaims the humanity of the subalterns.

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