



## A MARXIST STUDY OF ARUNDHATI ROY'S NOVEL *THE MINISTRY OF UTMOST HAPPINESS*

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### Abstract

This paper applies Marxist theory to examine the impact of state policies on marginalized groups and on middle-class communities in urban India in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Leveraging Marx's theory of class struggle and Gramsci's concept of hegemony, this study analyzes how the state accelerates social inequalities by supporting capitalist interests under the mask of human development. Through this theoretical framework, this paper investigates how these policies reinforce division in class that results in alienation and dispossession through military aggression among the urban and rural poor, particularly in the state of Kashmir. This analysis highlights the role of institutional state apparatus such as government, religion, and the military and identifies the proletariat revolution for human freedom in the postcolonial milieu. It is inferred from the novel that revolutionary struggle is put forth by the characters to redeem their rights for a quality living, and the response was suggestive of readers, but the characters, despite their struggle, were able to minister to themselves for their happiness.

**Key words:** Hegemony, geopolitics, alienation, marginalization, neocolonialism, ideology

### Introduction:

Arundhati Roy is one of the prolific writers who stood for the cause of the marginalized people in his writing and also an activist in the field for the rights of the indigenous and common people, particularly in the northern part of India. Following the success of his debut novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997), he wrote nonfiction works such as *The Cost of Living* (1999), *Field Notes on Democracy* (2022), *Power Politics* (2002), *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* (2002), *An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire* (2004), and *Capitalism: A Ghost Story* (2014). She wrote a groundbreaking novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), which fights for the downtrodden, marginalized genders, and social justice for the people who were made to be poor because of religious extremism. Drawing on the ideas of Karl Marx, particularly about the economic disparity due to the class struggle, the power dynamics are unequal because of the capitalist and the working-class people, which resulted in exploitation

of the latter. The novel depicts a society that is fragmented due to class, religion, and political ideologies. The structure of the novel connects from personal destinies to broader socio-economic dimensions. This article will throw light on *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) through the application of Marxist key concepts, which stand against the class division, gender discrimination, exhibiting capitalist networks, the failure of revolutionary socialism, the oppression of the state, the power of ideology to sustain class hierarchy, and the advocacy of the silent revolution of the proletariat.

### Discussions:

Arundhati Roy focuses on the exploitative nature of power relations between the working class and capitalist society. The people in the third world are exploited by their folks, who are present either as capitalists or as bureaucrats of the ruling state. The disparity is identified in gender and class, and their freedom of expression and right to live is jeopardized. The ruling class is biased, and it denies the right to coexistence for all genders. The author voices her concern for the less privileged people, particularly in the valley of North India. Despite the sedition charge against her, Roy defended her by claiming that she spoke about justice for the people of Kashmir, who live in one of the most brutal military occupations in the world.

The right place of hijra, particularly the protagonist Anjum, is denied in the society; therefore, she takes up her residence in the graveyard. The author's emotions for her characters are not evolved in tranquility but in remorse and anger for the weaker section of the society. The graveyard-like metaphorical nature of the underprivileged is displayed through the life of Anjum in the commentary and also in the valley where people are accustomed to death experiences on a daily basis by the brutal military occupation in the Kashmir Valley. The author highlights the religious disharmony that was thrust upon them by the capitalist society. The power struggle between the preliterate and the ruling government authorities is explained by the author through Anjum's recollection of the story on the bridge. Roy describes "Edited out of the flyover story, for example, was the fact that the incident had happened in 1976, at the height of the emergency declared by Indira Gandhi that lasted twenty-one months. . . civil rights had been suspended, newspapers were censored, and, in the name of population control, thousands of men (mostly Muslims) were herded into camps and forcibly sterilized. A new law—the maintenance of Internal Security Act—allowed the Government to arrest anybody on a whim" ( p. 34 -39).

The working-class human resource was systematically subdued so as to reduce their potential in the union of states, one of the largest democracies in the world. As Peter Singer opines in *Marx: A Very Short Introduction*, "criticism and philosophical theory alone will not end it. A more practical force is needed, and that force is provided by the artificially impoverished working class. The lowest class of society will bring about ' the actualization of philosophy' – by which Marx means the culmination of the philosophical and historical saga described, in a mystified form, by Hegel" (p. 30).

The geopolitical situation across the globe was modified by the terror attacks in New York City, which paved the way for a drastic number of refugees from Afghanistan. The augmentation of the proletariat across all the corners paved the way and necessitated the working-class revolution in modern India that safeguards their rights and existence. The confluence and clash between religions made the working class suffer more, and day by day

the list of proletariat increased. It is observed that the gap between the rich and poor is not diminished. The capitalist's new weapon to silence the working class is the ideology of religion that is enumerated by the writer herself. Roy opines, "The reaction, if indeed that is what it was, was neither equal nor opposite. The killing went on for weeks and was not confined to cities alone. The mobs were armed with swords and tridents and wore saffron headbands. They had cadastral lists of Muslim homes, businesses, and shops" (p. 45).

The consequence of the conflict resulted in alienation, where the working-class groups not only lost their employment and property but also their state of existence, which is under jeopardy. Despite Anjum's observations of religious and gender discrimination, she decided to move ahead in life for her identity establishment and for her existence. The writer delineated an alienated person named Saddam Hussain, who works in a mortuary. Due to his amateur working style, he was fired from the work. It is observed that he is unable to come out of poor living standards because of his poor economic status. Unable to cope with multiple jobs as a helper, conductor in the bus, and seller of newspapers in the railway stations, he becomes frustrated. Saddam Hussein is a typical example of the living conditions of the proletariat, a typical example of the living condition of the proletariat in a globalized world. The attitude of corruption and commission in the bourgeois made Sangeeta Madam one such authoritative figure created by the author to show the corrupt mindset of the officers. Roy documents, "The men on her roster had a twelve-hour working day and a six-day week. Sangeeta Madam's commission was 60 percent of their salary, which left them with barely enough food and a roof over their heads" (p. 74).

The state authority who was nominated to bridge the gap between the bourgeois and proletariat remains as a mute spectator to the problems of the lower strata of the society. The authoritarian attitude of the elected representatives and the advent of market capitalism are laid bare by the author. The consequence of market capitalism that displaces poor people from their inhabitants is observed: "Away from the lights and advertisements, villages were being emptied, cities too. Millions of people were being moved, but nobody knew where" (Roy, 2017, p. 98). This necessitates a vanguard notion of democracy that deviates from the traditional notion of representative democracy. As Francis Fukuyama opines in *"The End of History and the Last Man,"* "The bifurcation of democracy into representative democracy versus vanguard democracy severely limited the debate on democracy in the twentieth century. In the twenty-first century, political movements are attempting to transcend this dichotomous view of democracy and have placed direct and participatory democracy at the center of the alternative, emancipatory visions of the future through meaningful deliberation and participation in political and economic life by ordinary citizens." (p. 19). It is observed that Dr. Azad Bhartiya is an activist who stands against the odds of representative democracy. Accordingly, the failure of representative democracy and his allegiance to the capitalist empire that promotes neo-colonialism are seen. The fasting pronounced by Dr. Azad indicates the representative democracy fails to address the environmental issues and the status of the poor and the marginalized section of the society. The author opines the reason for Dr. Azad's fast "I am fasting against the following issue: I am against capitalist Empire, plus against US Capitalism, Indian and American State Terrorism/ All kinds of Nuclear weapons and crime, plus against the Bad Educational system/ corruption/ violence/ Environmental Degradation and all other Evils" (Roy, 2017, p. 126).

It is obvious that Dr. Azad is the representative of the proletariat who are exploited by their owners or landlords. It is clear that the condition of the democratic state is that it is against the poor and ignores them so as to sustain its status and power. It is inferred that the state is an instrument of domination that suppresses the poor. The fasting of Dr. Azad for the prolonged days necessitated a people's revolution for the evolution of equality and justice. Dr. Azad's action of renouncing his family for the downtrodden people causes a reconciliation with the bourgeois and proletariat only through a revolution by means of nonviolence. Further, it is observed from the self-made declaration statement of Dr. Azad that the caste system and class system collaborate to sustain the status quo of the proletariat. This notion is further reinforced by the religion that made Dr. Azad renounce the religion. The author put forth the real state of mind of Dr. Azad: "What caste am I? That is your question? with such a huge political agenda as mine . . . this inequality is contained in their scriptures. I am everything except for a Hindu. As an Azad Bhartiya, I can tell you openly that I renounced the faith of the majority of the people in this country for this reason" (Roy, 2017, p. 129).

Along with the sustenance of the status of the proletariat, justice is denied, and for some, justice is a distant dream. The atrocities of the capitalist network that named itself as a monster in the Union Carbide Pesticide Plant in Bhopal that killed thousands and made the generation of offspring with a deformed state. Roy documents the reality of the situation. "But in early December tragedy struck again, this time even harder. The Union Carbide pesticide plant in Bhopal sprang a deadly gas leak killed thousands of people" (p. 151).

The character in the novel Naga, a friend of Musa and Tilo, is observed as a communist who denounces religion because of its negligence in solving human problems. Faith in God must be accompanied by service to mankind, which is not observed by Naga from those who pronounce faith. Roy delineated the innate thoughts of Naga in an elocution competition: "The falsehood of our 330 million mute idols—the selfish deities we call Ram and Krishna—are not going to save us from hunger, disease, and poverty" (p. 164). Further, it is observed that the factor of love that is the central element in any religion is missing in the rhetoric of the pious person; that might be one of the factors for Naga denouncing religion. Further, to justify his stance, Roy highlights a telephone message forwarded by a Pakistani friend:

"I saw a man on a bridge about to jump.

I said, 'Don't do it!'

He said, 'Nobody loves me.'

I said, 'God loves you. Do you believe in God?'

He said, 'yes.'

I said, 'Are you a Muslim or a non-Muslim?'

He said, 'A Muslim.'

I said, 'Shia or Sunni?'

He said, 'Sunni.' . . .

I said, 'Die Kafir!' and I pushed him over" (p. 169).

The focus of the author lies in the material production through which the bourgeois demands are to sustain the status quo of struggle so that a certain group will be benefited. Roy opines, "The only thing that keeps Kashmir from self-destruction like Pakistan and Afghanistan is good old petit bourgeois capitalism" (p. 170). It is observed that the people believed in revolutionary socialism that tries to bring freedom through the idea of Jihad. But the

disadvantage of revolutionary socialism is that in the process of attaining freedom, it breeds criminals that are contrary to the idea of freedom and peace. Further, the structure of the society is not developed to a progressive state either as an independent state or as a peaceful state that existed in the state of Kashmir. The author delineated a particular group of people named “Ikhwanis” who were used by the bourgeois to sustain the power structure. “The Ikhwanis were rough men, mostly extortionists and petty criminals who had joined the military when they saw profit in that endeavor . . . At first they had proved to be an invaluable asset but then had become increasingly hard to control” (Roy, 2017, p. 172).

An exploitation-less society that gives heed to the cry of the masses, particularly in the state of Kashmir, was a utopian dream. Jalib Quadri, a human rights activist and a journalist who wishes a smooth transition from neurotic rule to the people's rule, is silenced by Major, the representative of the bureaucracy in the military regime. The author delineated the situation: “A couple of months after I arrived in Srinagar, which was in January of 1995, Amrik Sign had, on orders quite likely, apprehended a well-known lawyer and human rights activist, Jalib Qudri, at a checkpoint. . . A few days later Jalib Qudri's body showed up, eyes gouged out, and so on. Even by Kashmir's standards, this was somewhat excessive” (Roy, 2017, p. 175). It is obvious that Qudri, who attempts a social change by evolutionary socialism, is silenced by the military regime of Kashmir. Therefore, there is a revolutionary socialism to come to the streets and to oppose their exploitation.

It is observed that the people of Kashmir face a threat to their existence that kick-started the revolution. More often their revolutions were silenced by the capitalist powers through security forces. Roy opines, ‘Kashmir's mourned, wept, shouted their slogans, but in the end they always went back home’ (p. 181). It is observed their peaceful demonstration for their rights was unheard. Resistance to the capitalism of the state is evident in Ghafoor's story that happened in a place called Nawab Bazaar. One of the ill effects of the state is to disclose oppression of its people, as Tariq and Musa were compelled to search for an Afghan terrorist in the public toilet. The terrorist activity would be taken in a different perspective as a proletarian revolution that fights for the freedom of the conflict-ridden Kashmir state that holds the blood of the innocent. As Roy points out, the revolution in the state is that “we Kashmitis do not need to speak to each other anymore in order to understand each other; we do terrible things to each other, we wound and betray and kill each other, but we understand each other” (p. 194). The oppression of the state by military regimes is considered to be the effect of global capitalism, where terrorists are made through the sponsors from the different parts of the country on the one hand and the bureaucracy of the state on the other hand.

Marxism throws light on the power of ideology to sustain class hierarchy. One of the fractures that is associated with class is caste, which makes the members of the “lower caste” act as a puppet to the bourgeois to sustain class hierarchy. The underprivileged are being exploited to the interest of haves through the domain of ideology. The characters were restricted to the ‘third space.’ As Swapna Gopinath put forth the ideas of Soja in his article *Gendered Spaces Captured in Cultural Representation: Conceptualizing the Indian Experience in Arundhati Roy's The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, which is “the amalgamate of everything that constitutes the experience of living - it is the history—it is the history, the myth, the dream, the imagination, and the craft the defines the experience of living in a space” (p. 4). It is obvious that the state of Kashmir is a site of occupation that marks neo-imperial

strategies where the nation wages a war against its own people that leads to oppression. Due to its rich landscape that has potential economic resources, the people of the land are subjected to a military presence that makes many refugees. It is identified that the struggle for self-determination of the proletariat and constant military presence in the valley end in chaos and oppression on a long-term basis. The life of people in the state is problematic and complex because of the state of violence.

Hegemony through dominant ideology through religious ideas, the spirit of nationalism, and patriarchy that sustains gender and caste is identified in the novel. As O. Alisha opines in *The Representation of Cultural Materialism in Arundhati Roy's The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, "The superstructure, which consists of religion and ideologies became the dominant power in the modern India. Ideologies like democracy, Secularism, and Socialism is the heart of India's constitution. But it was not working in its own meaning; rather, it became false statements . . . The ideology of Democracy that is for the people, of the people and by the people is turned into pseudo-democracy, a hybrid regime." (p. 221) The violence against Muslims in the state of Gujarat, the constant military presence in the Kashmir Valley that perpetuated suffering for many despite its mission to protect its borders, and Anjum's state of desolation that led her to seek asylum in the grave are typical examples of the hegemony that carried out that consent. Maso opines in *Hegemony and Class Struggle: Trotsky, Gramsci, and Marxism*: "The question of hegemony, which emerged in certain concrete historical circumstances, remains valid beyond such circumstances because the need to coordinate the struggles of the working class with those of other oppressed sectors continues to be a current political problem" (p. 2). The oppressed are battling with an identity crisis where they struggle for their existence and quality of life. The ideology of gender disparity and caste consciousness is perpetuated either in the case of Anjum or in the case of characters belonging to lower sessions of the society.

It is obvious that the state of Kashmir is a site of occupation that marks the neo-imperial strategy, where the nation wages war against its own people to oppress the state of Kashmir due to its rich landscape that has potential economic resources. The people of the land are subjected to a military presence that makes tens of thousands refugees. It is inferred that the struggle for self-determination of the proletariat and constant presence of the military in the valley lead to chaos and oppression on a long-term basis. The life of people in the state is problematic and complex because of state violence. Despite their hardship, they seek asylum by strengthening their inner core with a silent revolution.

## Conclusion:

To sum up, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is considered a critique of the powerful social structure and its agenda of oppression and exploitation. The analysis of the novel through a Marxian perspective throws light on the conflict that happens in the intersection of cultural, religious, and political ideologies. Further, it calls for an alternate perspective that encompasses justice for the downtrodden and marginalized. Through the characters of Anjum, Dr. Azad Bhartiya, Tilo, and Saddam, it is identified that the proletariat revolution shall pave the way for the fulfillment of the agenda for justice and gender equality. The strategy that major characters use to dismantle the barriers of hegemony built over ideology is a silent revolution that is also considered to be a strategy of the proletariat. Dissent over the state power that supports

capitalism and social inequality can be eradicated so that happiness shall be ensured for the forgotten gender and marginalized people.

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