



Crossing Boundaries: Exploring Transgressability in Arundhati Roy's Works

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Abstract

*This study examines Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), a complex narrative exploring India's divided society. Departing from the magical realism of *The God of Small Things* (1997), Roy's second novel reflects her activism experience, confronting social injustice. Through interconnected stories of Anjum, a transsexual individual, and Tilo, an architect entangled in Kashmir's civil war, Roy portrays postcolonial/ neocolonial India's multifaceted conflicts (religious, political, social, sexual). Amidst hallucinatory violence and moments of harmony, characters traverse seemingly insurmountable borders. This analysis reveals Roy's nuanced exploration of resilience, defiance, and transcendence in everyday life, challenging fixed binaries and borders.*

Arundhati Roy's debut novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997), sparked controversy with its bold narrative, encapsulated in the motto: "Never again will a single story be told as though it is the only one" (Roy, *The God of Small Things*, 5). Twenty years later, Roy, a Man Booker Prize winner and global literary sensation, published *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017).

Dedicated to her mother, Mary Roy, a Syrian Christian and women's rights activist, *The God of Small Things* contrasted with her second novel's enigmatic dedication to the "Unconsoled." *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* opens with a quote from Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet: "I mean it's all a matter of your heart..." (Roy, *The Ministry*, 3), setting the tone for a complex exploration of human emotions.

This shift in dedication and motto reflects Roy's growth as a writer and her continued commitment to challenging singular narratives.

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness weaves together diverse stories, echoing the motto's emphasis on the multiplicity of experiences and perspectives.

Arundhati Roy's literary trajectory underwent a significant shift between her debut novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997), and her sophomore novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017). Her narrative evolved from personal and unique stories to collective experiences and abstract themes, transcending storytelling boundaries.

This transformation reflects Roy's prolific activism during the twenty-year interval. Contrary to critics' claims of her literary silence, she authored eighteen non-fiction volumes, including essays, interviews, and pamphlets. Titles like *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*, *War Talk*, and *Capitalism: A Ghost Story* reveal her unwavering commitment to social justice.

Roy's activism defined her public persona, overshadowing her novelist identity. She became a vocal critic of India's caste system, Hindu nationalism, nuclear politics, and US militarism. Her advocacy led to a prison sentence for contempt of court. Roy supported Kashmir's independence movement, opposed the Narmada dam project, and collaborated with Maoist/Naxalite rebels.

Che Guevara's concept of a true revolutionist is fascinating. He believed that a revolutionist shouldn't be driven by hatred, but rather by love - a deep passion for the cause they're fighting for. In his words, "a true revolutionist is always led by the truly wonderful feeling of love" [source: Guevara, 225-226]. This love is what fuels their willingness to make sacrifices, even if it means taking drastic measures.

Interestingly, Arundhati Roy's novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, explores similar themes of love and struggle, particularly in the context of Kashmir. However, the novel seems to arrive at a different conclusion, suggesting that the intersection of love and struggle can lead to complex, nuanced outcomes ¹.

Guevara's emphasis on love over hatred is significant. He saw hatred as a necessary tool for military victory, but not the defining characteristic of a revolutionist. Instead, love becomes the driving force, enabling individuals to take risks and make sacrifices for their beliefs.

This perspective raises important questions about the nature of revolution, activism, and social change. Can love truly be a powerful catalyst for transformation? How do we balance the passion of love with the harsh realities of conflict and struggle?

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Roy delves into these complexities, presenting a multifaceted exploration of love, struggle, and the human experience. While Guevara's ideals may seem romanticized, Roy's novel offers a more grounded, nuanced portrayal of the intricate relationships between love, politics, and social justice.

Arundhati Roy's sophomore novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, showcases her unwavering political activism, but this doesn't imply a compromise on literary quality. In fact,

her debut, *The God of Small Things*, demonstrated a masterful blend of storytelling and social commentary.

The God of Small Things revolves around the doomed love affair between Ammu, a Syrian Christian divorcee, and Velutha, a low-caste "untouchable" carpenter. Narrated through the eyes of Ammu's twin children, Esta and Rachel, the story unfolds against the backdrop of India's complex social and political landscape. The novel expertly weaves together personal tragedies, family dynamics, and societal issues, including the persistence of the caste system.

Roy skillfully balances the intimate, magical world of childhood with the harsh realities of India's recent past. The character of Baby Kochamma, driven by a festering grudge from a communist rally, exemplifies the destructive power of petty vendettas. The novel's central theme - the transgression of caste boundaries - underscores the tragic consequences of a system that divides people into "touchable" and "untouchable."

Roy's narrative masterfully shifts between:

- Lyrical, poetic moments (the lovers' meetings)
- Film-like, atmospheric descriptions (Ayemenem's landscape)
- Ominous foreshadowing (hinting at the tragic conclusion)

From the outset, Roy crafts a sensory, exotic atmosphere, tempered by an underlying sense of foreboding. This debut novel established Roy's unique voice, blending storytelling, social commentary, and lyrical prose.

In *Ayemenem*, May unfolds as a sweltering, languid month. Days stretch long and humid, heavy with anticipation. The river's tranquil flow slows, while black crows feast on vibrant mangoes amidst dust-green trees. Red bananas ripen, jackfruits burst, and bluebottles drone lazily, only to meet their demise against sun-kissed windowpanes.

Nights are clear, yet oppressive, weighed down by sultry expectation. But with June's arrival, the southwest monsoon brings relief, ushering in three months of turbulent wind and water. Fleeting moments of dazzling sunshine electrify children, beckoning them to play.

As the rains transform the landscape, boundaries dissolve. Tapioca fences sprout and bloom, brick walls surrender to moss, and pepper vines entwine electric poles. Wild creepers spill across flooded roads, while boats navigate market streets. Small fish dart through puddles filling highway potholes, as the countryside explodes into an exuberant green.

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, politics and personal fate are deeply entwined. The characters' private lives are shaped by the world of politics, and vice versa. Set over the past decade, with roots in the 1950s, the story revolves around social and political outcasts who create an idyllic community in a Delhi cemetery.

This unlikely sanctuary, reminiscent of prehistoric communities, is where marginalized individuals find solace. Three key characters converge during a 2011 anti-corruption protest: Anjum, an aging hijra; Saddam Hussein, a resourceful young man from an untouchable background; and Tilottama, an enigmatic middle-class woman.

Their lives intersect through an abandoned infant, born to a brutally tortured Naxalite guerrilla fighter. This child symbolizes hope, a potential turning point in tragic events, and life's triumph over adversity. As in myths and fairy tales, the child's unknown origins hold transformative power.

The novel culminates with the protagonists inhabiting a cemetery, building new homes atop old tombs. This poignant image embodies the creation of a borderless world where:

- Living and dead coexist
- Outcasts find community
- Love and family flourish

In this inclusive sanctuary, individuals from diverse backgrounds – including a Romanian dancer who died of lovesickness and a young couple starting anew – live together, alongside animals. The cemetery becomes a vibrant, life-affirming space, defying conventional boundaries.

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Arundhati Roy shifts the narrative focus from the 2011 anti-corruption protest's media spectacle to the unmediated struggles of marginalized

populations. The novel highlights the invisible protests of those silenced by the emerging neo-colonial India, such as:

- Victims of the 1984 Bhopal gas disaster
- Kashmir's Association of Mothers of the Disappeared

These "Unconsoled" individuals, to whom the novel is dedicated, embody the subaltern concept coined by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988). However, Roy's context differs: the silence is imposed not by Western colonial powers but by India's rising neo-colonialism.

Roy's novel presents contemporary India's complex, colorful world through the lens of small cultures, communities, and ideologies resisting Hindu nationalism. Unlike Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, which offered a symbolic, comprehensive image of India, Roy's work focuses on: Marginalized voices, Local struggles, Subcultures challenging dominant narratives, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* humanizes the "Unconsoled" through: Background stories, Personal narratives, Everyday struggles

By centering on these invisible lives, Roy's novel challenges the dominant discourse and offers a nuanced, multifaceted portrayal of India.

India's literary landscape has been shaped by numerous novels, from colonial-era works by E.M. Forster and Rudyard Kipling to postcolonial masterpieces by Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, and others. Arundhati Roy's novels contribute significantly to this historization, offering a distinct perspective.

While Rushdie's works present a universal, mythicized image of India, Roy's novels, particularly *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, focus on the subaltern, marginalized voices, and the fluidity of community borders. Her anti-elitist, anti-establishment, and anti-neocolonialist stance, evident in her non-fiction, permeates her fiction.

The God of Small Things (1997) drew comparisons to Rushdie's style, with critics noting:

- Intertextual links in content (telepathic child protagonists, unique narrative voice)

- Stylistic similarities (neologisms, capitalization, sentence fragments, metaphoric transference)

However, Roy's subsequent works, especially *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, diverge from Rushdie's postcolonial narrative template. Her focus shifts from colonialism's impact to the effects of neo-colonial corporate power in India.

Neo-colonialist criticism posits that India, despite gaining political independence in 1947, remains indirectly subjugated by its former colonizers through economic pressure, facilitated by a new colonial elite. This indirect subjugation intensified post-1980 with corporate globalization and neoliberal capitalism's dominance.

Salman Rushdie's early novels (*Grimus*, *Midnight's Children*, *Shame*, and *The Satanic Verses*) primarily explored decolonization's mythical aspects and the chaotic nation-building process. In contrast, Indian English novelists emerging in the 2000s, such as Aravind Adiga and Arundhati Roy, adopt a subversive stance against neo-colonialism and its economic model.

These authors convey criticism through portrayals of trauma inflicted on individuals, communities, and the environment during rapid transformation. Ksenia Svarc notes that fictional accounts, like Roy's debut novel, accurately reflect reality and offer a subversive critique of neo-colonial processes (Svarc 14).

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Arundhati Roy masterfully weaves traumatic experiences throughout Anjum's narrative. Born as Aftab, a Muslim boy in Delhi, Anjum transitions into a hijra, finding solace in this marginalized yet privileged community.

For Anjum, the hijra world represents an irreconcilable opposition, mirroring her own physical and emotional struggles. A community member describes hijras as "God's scientific experiment" to create beings "incapable of happiness" (Roy, *The Ministry* 36). An elder hijra wisdomously notes:

"The riot is inside us. The war is inside us. Indo-Pak is inside us. It will never settle down. It can't" (Roy, *The Ministry* 37).

Anjum's crisis stems not from her transsexuality, but from external forces. Her family, though initially shocked, ultimately accepts her transition. However, the outer world's violence and intolerance shatter her peace.

During a Gujarat pilgrimage, Anjum survives an anti-Muslim pogrom (which claimed approximately 2,000 lives) solely because her hijra identity spares her from the mob's brutality: "...don't kill her, brother, killing hijras brings bad luck" (Roy, *The Ministry* 62). This traumatic event leaves her scarred and disconnected from all communities.

Seeking refuge, Anjum retreats to a Delhi graveyard, where she finds kinship with fellow outcasts – broken, wounded individuals cast out of traditional society. Together, they cultivate tolerance, acceptance, and understanding.

Anjum's life becomes one of contemplation and wisdom, akin to a hermit or wise woman:

"She lived in the graveyard like a tree. At dawn she saw the crows off and welcomed the bats home. At dusk she did the opposite" (Roy, *The Ministry* 3).

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness by Arundhati Roy weaves two narrative threads. One follows Tilottama (Tilo), a charismatic and strong-willed architect, and her friends over two decades.

Tilo's story begins with her college play rehearsals, where she captivates three classmates: Musa (later Commander Gulrez), Naga, and Biplab Dasgupta. Their lives intersect repeatedly, amidst love, politics, and war.

Musa, a Kashmir native, becomes a key figure in the Kashmir independence movement. Tilo's connection to him exposes her to the region's civil war. Naga, a journalist, marries Tilo to protect her from Indian Army interrogation. Biplab, an Intelligence Service officer, quietly adores Tilo and provides shelter while uncovering the fates of Musa and Naga.

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Arundhati Roy masterfully navigates the tumultuous landscape of Kashmir, weaving together vivid descriptions of death, despair, and resilience.

Death pervades every aspect of life: "Career. Desire. Dream. Poetry. Love. Youth itself." Graveyards proliferate, becoming as

commonplace as parking lots. Roy's familiarity with local military slang, geography, and culture shines through in concrete details and ironic observations.

Amidst the devastation, Roy intersperses lyrical passages capturing the emotional state of civilians living amidst civil war:

"Nightmares were promiscuous... they cart wheeled wantonly into other people's dreams." (Roy, *The Ministry* 307)

Roy presents Kashmir's independence fighters with unwavering sympathy, focusing on small, telling details: Courage, Camaraderie, Love (echoing Che Guevara's notion of revolutionaries)

Kashmir's struggles occupy a central place in Roy's work, as evident in *The Shape of the Beast*, a collection of interviews. She discusses socio-political injustices, including: Displacement by dams and industry, Gujarat genocide, Maoist rebels, Kashmir's independence.

For Roy, Kashmir represents more than a geopolitical entity; it embodies the human condition:

"...for a writer, Kashmir gives you an understanding of power, powerlessness, brutality, bravery, and the dilemmas of human condition." (Roy, *The Shape* 244)

Roy expresses her desire to continue exploring Kashmir's complexities in her writing:

"I wouldn't want to write a book about Kashmir; I hope Kashmir will be in all the books I write." (Roy, *The Shape* 244)

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Arundhati Roy unites the novel's threads through Tilo's journeys to Musa, a Kashmiri freedom fighter, and the convergence of protagonists around an abandoned infant. This convergence births a community, or even a family, among outcasts and marginalized individuals.

Anjum transforms a graveyard into Jannat Guest House, dissolving boundaries between life and death, castes, religions, and genders. "Jannat" (Urdu for "paradise") irony notwithstanding, Anjum creates a haven.

Symbolically, this community counters modern India's societal crises. Amidst endless

antagonisms, Anjum's solution offers: Self-affirmation for marginalized people, Tolerance and collaboration, Independence from dominant structures

The closing scene presents Roy's vision for a utopian community. This fictional solution echoes postcolonial writers' tendencies to evoke precolonial nations, rejecting colonial-tainted modernity (Barry 127). Anjum's Jannat Guest House resembles a precolonial paradise.

However, its fragility is emphasized: threatened by unconditional economic growth, this sanctuary could vanish at any moment, like Saddam Hussein's father's murder site turned shopping mall.

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* concludes with a poignant, fairy tale-like unity among its marginalized protagonists, offering consolation amidst hardship. This symbolic haven, forged in a cemetery, represents: Momentary harmony, Subcultures' resilience, Interdependence among disparate communities

Roy integrates national and regional history into her narrative, maintaining the subaltern perspective of *The God of Small Things*. This approach aligns with contemporary novelists' tendencies to incorporate historical contexts.

Scholars like Manoj Sreenevasan note that blending fiction and history creates multiple images of the nation, historicizing the narrative (Sreenevasan 111). Following Stephen Greenblatt, fiction can serve as an alternative history, offering new perspectives on the past (Greenblatt 128).

Roy's technique differs, prioritizing literary storytelling while acknowledging historical reality. This echoes Edward Said's assertion that literature is never neutral, reflecting interests, powers, and passions (Said 385).

The Ministry's protagonists experience the entwining of fiction and history, as India's recent past shapes their personal fates. Terry Eagleton's phrase resonates: "We cannot choose to live non-historically: history is quite as much our destiny as death" (Eagleton 209).

Roy's works reaffirm Foucault's notion that knowledge is power-driven, constituting discourses on the Other (Said's Orientalism).

However, in neo-colonialism and neoliberalism, the colonizer-colonized dynamic shifts.

The Ministry gives voice to diverse subalterns, emphasizing: Religious, ethnic, and sexual differences, Small community importance, Cooperative resistance against India's monolithic narrative

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