



Philosophical Feminism in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

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Abstract

In order to understand how Arundhati Roy's two novels, *The God of Small Things* (1997) and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), build and challenge gendered subjectivity within the Indian social order, this dissertation conducts a comparative feminist-philosophical reading of both works. The study contends that Roy's fiction stages resistance through endurance, transgression, and the rejection of imposed categories of identity rather than triumphant emancipation by examining her female and non-binary characters through the combined lenses of feminist philosophy, postcolonial critique, and gender performativity. The analysis uses Anjum, Tilo, and Revathy in the later work and Ammu, Rahel, Mammachi, and Baby Kochamma in the older one to show a persistent authorial focus with the penalties imposed on nonconformists by patriarchal, caste-based, and nationalist structures. The study places this reading in the context of previous Roy work and suggests future lines of inquiry for comparative postcolonial feminist research.

Keywords: feminism, gender, patriarchy, postcolonial literature, Arundhati Roy, Indian fiction

1. Introduction

In metaphysics, ethics, and political theory, feminist philosophy poses the topic of how gender influences a society's conception of reason, virtue, and personhood. It is a range of approaches rather than a single doctrine that is bound together by a common commitment: that real justice requires revealing the unmarked masculine norm that has often constituted the foundation of inherited intellectual categories. Though they differ in approach and focus, thinkers as diverse as Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, and Bell Hooks believe that gender is a structuring force in social life rather than a natural fate or incidental feature.

For this kind of investigation, Arundhati Roy's novels provide exceptionally rich material. Three generations of women of a Syrian Christian family in Kerala are followed in *The God of Small Things* (1997), which illustrates how caste, colonial legacy, and household power intersect on the bodies of Ammu, Rahel, Mammachi, and Baby Kochamma. Twenty years later, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) broadens the scope significantly by focusing on a hijra protagonist, a Kashmiri war, and a group of individuals that choose to live outside of accepted gender and national classifications. When read as a whole, the two books explore a similar authorial concern in two very distinct narrative registers: what happens to a self that is intended to be destroyed by a strict social order and how that self-survives. This essay explores what each novel adds to a comparative knowledge of gendered resistance in the postcolonial Indian context, reading that concern as a kind of philosophical feminism in its own right that operates through narrative rather than argument.

2. Literature Review

The feminist aspects of Roy's literature have been examined from a number of perspectives in previous research. In order to make the case that *The God of Small Things* provides a realistic picture of women's subordination within Indian patriarchal standards, Khan (2018) interprets the book via the perspectives of Mammachi, Ammu, and Rahel. This places Roy in the company of other Indian women authors who write against inherited gender scripts. Using a psychoanalytic and postcolonial perspective, Nandi (2010) explores how the novel's handling of parental grief and ambivalence challenges any simple interpretation of female solidarity, demonstrating instead how colonial and familial systems impact the women who live within them. Dingwaney Needham (2005) concentrates on the narrative structure of the book, contending that Roy's disjointed, non-linear storytelling is inextricably linked to its political content: the "small voice of history" that the book reclaims belongs precisely to those, such as Ammu and Velutha, who would otherwise be silenced by official history and caste hierarchy.

Gender and sexual identity issues outside of the male/female dichotomy have received increased attention in The Ministry of Utmost Happiness scholarship. A Cixousian analysis of the hijra characters in the book is provided by Anuar and Asl (2021), who contend that Anjum and Tilo perform a self-conscious "rewriting" of gender that defies rigid classification and represents "ureñine as a kind of self-emancipation rather than victimization. In their analysis of the novel's political context, Suleman et al. (2020) contend that Roy connects the gender politics of the hijra community with the broader political traumas of modern India, such as the Kashmir conflict, to imply that marginalization based on gender and marginalization based on nation and religion are structurally related rather than distinct issues.

Taken together, this body of work supports a reading of Roy's two novels as complementary case studies in feminist-philosophical fiction: the earlier novel anchored in the domestic and caste-inflected patriarchy of 1990s Kerala, the later novel opening outward to a more explicitly intersectional account of gender, religion, and nation. Building on previous research, this essay contends that the fundamental logic of both books is resistance via perseverance rather than resistance via triumph.

3. Theoretical Framework

The study draws on a wider constellation of feminist and postcolonial theory, each strand giving a unique vocabulary to the readings that follow rather than being evoked for its own sake.

De Beauvoir's (1949/2011) key theory that woman is historically formed as man's Other, rather than as a self-defining subject, supports the reading of Mammachi and Baby Kochamma as women whose identities are arranged solely around male approbation or male absence. Rich's (1976) account of motherhood as simultaneously an experience and a patriarchal institution informs the reading of Ammu's relationship to Rahel and Estha, and of Anjum's adoptive motherhood of Miss Jebeen the Second, as sites where biological and chosen forms of maternal care both exceed and are constrained by institutional expectation.

Butler's (1990) explanation of gender performativity offers a vocabulary for interpreting characters, particularly Anjum, whose gender is an ongoing, socially observed enactment rather than a fixed biological given. Nanda's (1990) ethnographic study of hijra communities in India provides the social and historical context for this reading, demonstrating that Anjum's hijra role is a recognized, if marginal, third-gender category within Indian culture rather than a purely literary invention. The reading of Anjum and Tilo as characters involved in a continuous act of self-authorship rather than passive victimhood is based on Cixous's (1976) concept of Réureñine, a mode of writing the female body and self against the constraints of a patriarchal symbolic order. Anuar and Asl (2021) directly reference this theoretical framework in their own analysis of the hijra characters in the novel. Irigaray's (1985) critique of a symbolic order built around a single, masculine standard of sexual difference, and Kristeva's (1982) account of abjection, the casting out of what a social order cannot assimilate, together illuminate Anjum's early years spent living in the graveyard behind the government hospital, a literal space of abjection from which she must build a liveable life. Foucault's (1978) account of sexuality as historically produced through discourse rather than simply repressed by it further supports a reading of the hijra community's social position as constructed through specific legal and religious histories rather than as a timeless fact of nature.

Mohanty's (1988) critique of Western feminist scholarship's tendency to construct a singular, undifferentiated "Third World woman" cautions against reading Roy's characters as representative of Indian women in general; instead, Ammu, Mammachi, Rahel, Anjum, and Revathy are read here as differently positioned by caste, religion, class, and region, so that no single account of oppression covers all of them equally. Spivak's (1988) account of the subaltern's structural inability to be heard on her own terms offers a way of reading the silences that surround Ammu's punishment and Revathy's death: both women's suffering becomes legible to others only after the fact, and largely through voices other than their own. Said's (1978) account of Orientalist discourse, and Bhabha's (1994) related work on hybridity and the ambivalence of colonial and postcolonial identity, together frame the residual colonial hierarchies, of language, religion, and manner, that structure the Ayemenem household in *The God of Small Things*. Trinh's (1989) critique of the anthropological and literary conventions through which the postcolonial woman is made a spectacle for outside observation is used, more cautiously, as a reminder to this paper's own method: the aim throughout is to read Roy's characters as agents within a specific social order rather than as illustrative specimens of a generalised non-Western womanhood.

Underwriting all of these strands is hooks' (2000) insistence that feminism is a political commitment against domination in all its forms, rather than a project of individual empowerment alone, which supports the paper's reading of Roy's female and hijra characters as figures of structural critique rather than merely sympathetic victims.

4. Roy, Feminism, and the Novel: Author and Context

Roy was born in Shillong in 1961 and raised largely in Kerala; *The God of Small Things*, her debut novel, won the Booker Prize for Fiction in 1997, making her the first Indian woman to receive the award. The novel's setting in Kerala allows Roy to draw together the residue of British colonialism, the rigidities of the Indian caste system, and the authority of patriarchal family structures within a single household. Two decades later, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) extended Roy's concerns outward from the family to the nation, incorporating the Kashmir conflict, communal violence, and the lives of Delhi's hijra community. Roy has continued to combine this fiction with essay

writing and activism on human rights and environmental justice, and both novels are frequently read as extensions, rather than departures, from that activism. Notably, Roy's own long introductory essay to the annotated edition of B. R. Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste*, published as "The Doctor and the Saint" (Roy 2014), makes explicit an engagement with caste politics that had already been dramatised, two decades earlier, in the fate of Velutha in *The God of Small Things*; reading the novel alongside this later essay clarifies that Roy's treatment of caste in her fiction is continuous with a sustained, non-fictional political argument rather than a passing thematic backdrop.

5. Gendered Subjection in *The God of Small Things*

The God of Small Things is narrated from a female perspective and organised around three generations of women: Baby Kochamma, Mammachi, and Ammu and her daughter Rahel. Although each person's experience of patriarchal authority is unique, the book maintains that these variations are rooted in a shared structural pattern. Mammachi has little choice but to put up with her husband Pappachi's aggression and disdain, her identity absorbed into a union that gives her husband absolute power. Ammu, having left an abusive marriage, returns to her family home only to discover that a divorced daughter has no recognised place within it; she is treated, in the novel's own logic, as a woman without a category, and the abuse, humiliation, and eventual ostracism she suffers stem directly from this lack of a socially sanctioned position. Her relationship with Velutha, an untouchable man, becomes the occasion for the novel's most direct interrogation of caste as a gendered institution: it is Ammu's transgression of caste boundaries, quite as much as her transgression of marital norms, that the family and the wider community move to punish.

Rahel, Ammu's daughter, experiences the aftermath of her mother's punishment as a kind of drift: displaced from school to school and eventually into a marriage she does not fully choose, she embodies the intergenerational cost of her mother's transgression. Khan (2018) reads this pattern across the three women as evidence that the novel offers an unusually candid account of how Indian patriarchal norms discipline women who step outside sanctioned roles, whether through divorce, inter-caste love, or simple non-conformity. Nandi (2010) adds a further dimension, arguing that the novel complicates any simple narrative of female solidarity: Baby Kochamma, embittered by her own thwarted desire, becomes an active agent of the very patriarchal order that has constrained her, showing that women in the novel are not uniformly positioned as victims of a male-authored system but are themselves capable of enforcing it. Tickell (2003) situates this family drama within a wider argument about the novel's postcolonial cosmopolitanism, showing how the Ipe household's Anglophile aspirations, most visible in Chacko's Oxford education and Pappachi's colonial-era employment, are inseparable from the domestic patriarchy the novel critiques: the family's internalised colonial hierarchies of taste and manner reinforce, rather than soften, its treatment of Ammu and Velutha.

According to Dingwaney Needham (2005), Roy's fractured, achronological narrative structure is a feminist and political gesture in and of itself. By eschewing linear, authoritative storytelling, the novel recovers the perspectives of those that official histories of caste and family would otherwise omit. This formal argument is consistent with Spivak's (1988) more general assertion that subaltern subjects are structurally prevented from speaking in their own voice within dominant historical narratives: the novel formally enacts the very silencing it criticizes because Ammu's own account of her relationship with Velutha is never given to the reader in her own words, but rather is reconstructed after her death through Rahel's fractured memory. When taken as a whole, these viewpoints paint a picture of the novel in which gendered subjection operates concurrently through caste hierarchy, familial authority, and narrative convention, and in which resistance takes the form of Ammu and Velutha's fleeting, doomed declaration of a self and a desire that the social order cannot accommodate rather than victory.

6. Gender, Identity, and Resistance in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness expands its description of gender beyond the male/female dichotomy, while *The God of Small Things* focuses its feminist critique on a single home. Its protagonist, Anjum, is a hijra who, according to the novel, is neither just a man nor a woman; her identity is defined as a state she lives in rather than a classification, more akin to a nation of her own. Anuar and Asl's (2021) claim that Roy creates Anjum's gender as an ongoing act of self-authorship rather than a static biological truth is supported by this framing, which aligns the novel with Cixous's concept of *déroulement* as a practice of recreating the self against imposed definitions.

Anjum's story is set in the graveyard behind a Delhi hospital, which serves as both a literal and symbolic location for her exile from society. Once she makes friends with the blind imam Ziauddin, her early mockery by the locals gives way to a shaky community constructed at the periphery; the labels others give her, designating her as a figure without a permanent home, highlight how thoroughly the novel treats social position—rather than just biology—as constitutive of gender. According to Mendes and Lau (2019), Roy purposefully portrays Anjum and the graveyard community as agents who transform precarity into a resource for creative, alternative forms of living rather than as passive victims of their marginal position. According to this interpretation, the graveyard serves less as a site of pure abjection and more as a place where new, improvised forms of kinship and survival become possible precisely because conventional social structures have failed. Tilo, an architecture student, serves as a second, distinctly inflected model of resistant femininity alongside Anjum. Self-sufficient, detached from family, and unwilling to fit in with class or hostel norms, she exemplifies the independence Roy frequently links to feminist self-possession.

Here, Mohanty's (1988) warning against viewing "the Indian woman" or "the hijra" as a singular, universally applicable figure is helpful: Any interpretation that would reduce Anjum and Tilo to a single representative form of

marginalized gender identity would be undermined by their starkly different approaches to family, education, and financial independence, and the novel appears to be purposefully organized to maintain this distinction.

Revathy, a third character, makes a brief appearance but is crucial to the novel's thesis. A Maoist activist in Andhra Pradesh, she is subjected to sustained sexual violence by her captors, an episode Roy renders in unflinching, testimonial detail before Revathy is ultimately killed. Rather than reproduce that testimony at length, it is enough to note its function within the novel: it makes visible, in the starkest possible terms, the violence that political and patriarchal authority are willing to enact on a woman's body, and it does so specifically for a woman who had claimed political agency. Suleman et al. (2020) read this episode, together with the novel's treatment of the Kashmir conflict and communal violence, as evidence that Roy deliberately braids gender-based oppression together with the state's other forms of violence against marginalised groups, refusing to treat the hijra community's exclusion as a separate or lesser concern from the nation's other traumas.

Roy has been explicit, in interviews, that she regards India's grassroots resistance movements as a source of hope precisely because they gather together people excluded on many different grounds at once. The novel's structure enacts this same conviction: Anjum, Tilo, and Revathy are brought into relation with one another not because they share an identity but because each, in a different register, refuses the position a patriarchal, casteist, or nationalist order has assigned her. Saikumar (2019) argues that the Kashmir sections of the novel are best understood through a wider crisis of jurisdiction, in which competing claims of state sovereignty, military authority, and local self-determination leave ordinary Kashmiri lives, including the female and gender-nonconforming lives the novel foregrounds, permanently exposed to a legal and political order that cannot, or will not, fully protect them; this framing reinforces Suleman et al.'s (2020) argument that gendered and national forms of marginalisation in the novel are structurally, not incidentally, linked.

7. Discussion: Two Novels, One Feminist Logic

Reading the two novels together suggests a consistent authorial logic that spans the twenty years separating their publication. Both novels locate feminist critique in the disciplining of women, and of those who refuse binary gender altogether, who step outside socially sanctioned categories: divorced, inter-caste, or trans. Both stage the cost of that refusal in unsparing terms, whether through Ammu's ostracism and early death or through the violence inflicted on Revathy. And both nonetheless resist reducing their female and hijra characters to pure victims: Mammachi, Ammu, Anjum, Tilo, and Revathy all exercise forms of agency, however constrained, that the surrounding social order cannot fully suppress. This suggests that Roy's feminism, across both novels, is best understood not as a philosophy of triumphant liberation but as what might be called a philosophy of endurance: survival, self-authorship, and the refusal of imposed categories function, in Roy's fiction, as the primary forms gendered resistance can take under conditions designed to prevent it.

8. Conclusion

This comparative reading of *The God of Small Things* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* has argued that Roy's fiction constitutes a sustained, if implicit, philosophical feminism: an inquiry, carried out through narrative rather than argument, into how patriarchal, caste-based, and nationalist structures discipline those who will not conform to the positions assigned them, and into the forms of endurance and self-authorship that remain available under such conditions. *The God of Small Things* grounds this inquiry in the domestic and caste-inflected patriarchy of a single Kerala family; *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* widens it to encompass gender identities beyond the binary and the wider political traumas of the Indian nation-state. Read together, the two novels support Khan's (2018) and Anuar and Asl's (2021) shared conclusion that Roy's fiction offers a realistic, unsentimental account of women's and hijras' subjugation while insisting on the residual agency of those it depicts. Further comparative work might usefully extend this framework to Roy's non-fiction essays, or set her novels alongside other postcolonial women writers working through similar questions of gendered and caste-based exclusion, to test how far this logic of resistance through endurance holds across the wider field of postcolonial feminist fiction.

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