
**Polyphonic Resistance: Multivocality and Marginalized Identities in
Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness***

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Article Received: 13/04/2025**Article Accepted:** 15/05/2025**Published Online:** 17/05/2025**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2025.18.05.308

Abstract: Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is a poignant narrative that contests the dominant discourses of identity, belonging, and resistance through its polyphonic structure and multivocal storytelling. This paper explores how the novel acts as a site of polyphonic resistance, giving voice to marginalized identities and subverting hegemonic narratives of power and control. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of polyphony, the study examines the ways in which diverse characters—Anjum, Tilo, and others—embody a multiplicity of perspectives that converge and clash, creating a rich tapestry of voices. The novel's nonlinear structure, fragmented storytelling, and incorporation of diverse cultural intertexts are analyzed as tools for amplifying silenced voices. The spatial metaphor of the graveyard is explored as an inclusive and resistance site representing a common human identity, beyond the distinctions of class and caste, in a society. Also, the paper places the narrative within the greater socio-political context of contemporary India. It is a critical exercise in relation to issues like caste, gender, religion, and environmental degradation. The story of resilience and solidarity written by Roy does not get erased but resists and insists on being known. In conclusion, this study shows how the novel not only tells the stories of its characters but also critiques systems of power that perpetuate inequality, making it an attractive example of literature as a vehicle for social change.

Key Words: Polyphony, Resistance, Multivocality, Marginalized Identities, Fragmented storytelling, socio-political, Arundhati Roy, Narrative Theory.

Introduction: Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is a complex tale, comprised of the strands of various voices, histories and lives which have no business conforming to the classical art of storytelling. John Freeman, in his article "Novel examines how sectarian hatred, violence shapes characters in India" has said "'The Ministry of Utmost Happiness' is a fierce and fabulously disobedient novel, a book as fearless as her essays on the environment, nuclear proliferation, and Kashmiri independence are bold" (2017). The

novel has also intricate levels of discourse, so to say, meets narrative chaos head-on and instead emphasizes on being multiple in regards to identity, belonging as well as local and global forms of resistance. Central to this multifaceted construct, is a theory devised by Mikhail Bakhtin on polyphony, that is, a narrative format that accepts the simultaneous existence of a plurality of voices that possess different truths.

This paper seeks to investigate Roy's polyphonic structure from the point of view of resistance focusing on those who have been marginalized within the text. This paper also aims to investigate how the polyphonic means of fragmented storytelling, nonlinear narratives and intertextuality, work towards the amplification of silenced voices and the contestation of dominant discourses. Furthermore, Roy's metaphor of the graveyard as a place of inclusion and resistance is ideal in this sense, since it provides a post caste, gender, or class identity space of belonging where humanity is more important than the differences.

Regardless of its vividness, the novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* stands out as a multi-layered work of fiction revolving around several decades and geographical regions of India. The book traces the lives of some socially alienated people, one being Anjum, a hijra, and along with Tilotama, a woman caught in a web of politics and love. Their individual lives intricately evolve with these immense social problems of communal intolerance, caste and class struggles, ecological distress, and even the crisis revolving in Kashmir. The resurrection of Anjum stands the centre of the narrative. Born as Aftab, Anjum's transition leads her to abandon her family and society. Subsequently, she establishes a home for outcasted, in a graveyard of Delhi. "I'm a mehfil, I'm a gathering. Of everybody and nobody, of everything and nothing. Is there anyone else you would like to invite? Everyone's invited" (4). That specific graveyard soon begins to act as a place of shelter for people from all types of marginalized groups, from Dalits and queer to forgotten children. Anjum builds the life she always longed for in that alter space of her, as it now served as a symbol of defiant insurrection.

The novel also examines India's socio-political situation, especially the Kashmir problem through the character of S. Tilotamma (Tilo), whose romances and friendships with important actors in that problem illustrate the cost of political violence. Claire Messud, in her article "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness by Arundhati Roy — 'compelling'", for Financial Times wrote: "the telling involves an unusual combination of epic and classic echoes; of unexpected detail; and, unforgettably, an unflinching realism....diversity of contemporary India, in which darkness and exuberant vitality are inextricably intertwined" (2017). In the stories of these characters and in the changing scenery of India, Roy builds a story that seeks to challenge the established hegemony, denounces the silencing of historically rooted groups in the society, and seeks for a purpose of resistance and unity. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is one that speaks against the injustice done towards people, for those who do not get heard, for those who have been silenced for too long, and for those areas which have been conveniently written out of the narrative. It is a type of story that gives

importance to a life story amalgamated with a voice encompassing a perception on Indian society in particular.

The concept of polyphony in literature is defined by Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian philosopher and literary critic. Andrew Robinson in his article “In Theory Bakhtin: Dialogism, Polyphony and Heteroglossia” on Ceasefire stated:

Polyphony literally means multiple voices. Bakhtin reads Dostoevsky’s work as containing many different voices, unmerged into a single perspective, and not subordinated to the voice of the author. Each of these voices has its own perspective, its own validity, and its own narrative weight within the novel. (2011)

According to Bakhtin, it is a structure whereby multiple voices exist even in the absence of a single authoritative voice, and each voice has its own belief system, worldview, and social class. Arundhati Roy has used the polyphonic structure in the writing of the novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Just like polyphony features, multiple independent melody lines, the stories in the novel also feature multiple characters that overlap, intertwine, and interact with each other, hence, creating a plethora of voices, defeating the idea that a single perspective of the world is adequate.

The polyphonic nature of the novel does not lie simply in the sheer number of voices Roy puts forth, but in their stance against narration as well. “You have no idea how a people like us, who have survived a history and a geography such as ours, have learned to drive our pride underground” (335). This line captures the transition from the political to the personal, reflecting fragmented storytelling and historical erasure. They represent various ideologies, positions, cultures and geographical locations, which in turn, helps in ascertaining the context that underlies the ostensible critique of power systems. These characters from Anjum and Tilo to the unidentifiable people from the graveyard site have their positions in a social hierarchy, which do not only provide a resistance in the grand narrative but also dismantles it. The voice of the oppressed and residual survivors of the society resonates through each character in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. The novel depicts an intertwined anecdotes of courage and belonging, occupied in the life stories of the dual protagonists, Anjum and Tilo.

Anjum's account provides a vigorous critique of gender and identity politics, and her experience as a transgender woman gives voice to the precepts that have often been silenced in India, Roy argues. “‘Others have horrible stories, the kind you people like to write about,’ she would say. ‘Why not talk to them?’ (26). Anjum’s voice, which is often suppressed in the conventional socio-political landscape, is such that denies the linearity to the rolls of a conventional plot. The fractured existence of Anjum finds resonance in the disjointed telling of how her story unfolds. Her experiences of being nurtured and cared for in her family as a kid only to be displaced from her home and growing up in a hijra community, to later on being a hesitant voice for the voiceless in a graveyard, cut through the violence that is

inflicted on the individuals that combat with gender, and the quest for identity and the necessity for being part of a community of outcasts. Roy's treatment of Anjum's narrative also sheds light on the pluralistic nature of the narrative- memories, traumatic episodes and the quest for logic all help in retelling the story. Anjum's voice is not oppressed, it is amplified through a dialogue with society's conventions that challenge her determination to displace.

Tilo, one of the key characters in the novel, occupies within a nether layer of resistance. Since she is a woman who has to deal with multiple layers such as the Indian and the foreign, the Hindu and the Muslim, the scholar and the revolutionary, Tilo is equally dialectical, non-linear and fractured. Just like what she recalls while she was embroiled in the turbulence in Kashmir: "These days in Kashmir, you can be killed for surviving.' In battle, Musa told Tilo, enemies can't break your spirit, only friends can" (268-69). Her life is more so fragmented during the course of her story, and reality is in itself a nonlinear entity and turbulence more or so three-dimensional than just traditional history. Tilo's burst of recollection of time and space is the very deconstruction of systems both social and political of how timelines and states' essence collapse and coexist. Tilo's voice in the narrative encapsulates her the great defender, hailing the deconstruction of the national ideal and the standing of the individual within it.

The graveyard, which later gets renamed as Jannat Guest House, is where Anjum along with other oppressed individuals go and is considered another type of multi voiced resistance. "Gradually Jannat Guest House became a hub for Hijras who, for one reason or another, had fallen out of, or been expelled from, the tightly administered grid of Hijra Gharanas" (68). The very location is emblematic of the multitude of silenced and ignored voices, necessarily from the dead and from the living too. It is that which houses the outcasts and at the same time is that which is a memory that needs to be cherished. The graveyard is not just a place where the protagonists go to while the active part of the story goes on, it is a vessel from which the pains, hopes and the struggles of the voiceless people who rest there comes out. The multidimensional group of people, transgender people, the economically challenged, political rebels, amalgamate into a single voice which opposes the caste, class and gender discrimination that the society out there imposes.

The concept of Bakhtinian polyphony is that no single voice can ever dominate an array of voices. As Roy narrates in his novel, the voices do not coexist in a static manner. Instead, they engage, contest and even at many instances, oppose each other. The struggle that exists between these characters and their ideas makes the story more compelling and engages the reader with the dichotomies and intricacies that are distinctive of contemporary India.

Taking Anjum's experiences of the graveyard and her interactions with her community for instance, they appear somewhat different from other dominant voices found in urban spaces of the novel, like the politicians or the wielders of state power. During these

interactions, the novel demonstrates the ways in which these voices are at times in conflict, such as in the case of the violence against Anjum's community or the brutal force of the state. The splintered character of Anjum's existence collides with these overarching political realities and discourses about which she finds herself constantly oscillating, and the discomfort created out of that reaches a certain breaking point. Roy, however, takes care that one position, like the state's, is not given primacy over others. Both the position of the state and the position of the oppressed are permitted without being made complementary. One position makes sense in relation to the other, and the other one makes sense in relation to the first one, and to all the rest that have been said in the novel; it is up to the reader to unravel the riddle of the narrative and its meaning, if there is one, as there indeed is, meaning it is never uniform.

The life of Tilo, an activist, and the everyday life of the marginalized community in the cemetery depicts the relationship between individual and collective resistance. For Tilo, her activism and communism are turned upside down once more because for the inhabitants of the cemetery, political activism has been reduced to simply surviving.

She worked a long day and, for the first time in her life, slept a full night. (Miss Jebeen the Second slept with Anjum.) With each passing day Tilo's mind felt less like one of Musa's 'recoveries'. Despite making plans every other day to do so, she had not visited her apartment since she left. (397)

These two forms of resistance bring to light how it is essential to broaden the discourse of oppression other than the fight against it. Rather, it indicates that there's a plethora of ways to resist, all of which are appropriate in their own way.

Moreover, Roy's non-linear tactic aids the narrative in operating at multiple registers. While the characters' lives at the heart of contemporary India are intertwined with its political chaos, the fractured narrative style represents their explosion in a different way. The story glides from one character to another through a multitude of timeframes and settings, creating a sense of confusion and disarray that perfectly illustrates the characters living in the lower realms of society.

This sort of disintegration accomplishes a few tasks at once. Trauma of the individual or the society is a clear break and in places a clear divide within the continuum, and saw this from Roy's story as well. For example, the way Tilo's thoughts are captured, particularly her history of violence and her engagement in the political milieu, everything is incoherent in so many ways. Danish Suleman, et al comments: "War happens in Delhi in other forms as a sign of trauma and psychological harm which Anjum brought back to town after her horrific experience of brutality in Gujarat," (6). This can be seen in Anjum's narration gets influenced a lot after her face off with the Gujarat communal riots as well. A style of writing is representation and critique and this style collapses coherence in narratives and fixations on generic endings in which the failure to finish the story completely is a form of resistance. Afrin Khan A and Dr Rema V, state that:

The novel also showcases acts of resistance and resilience by marginalized communities. Anjum's creation of a communal living space in the graveyard is an act of defiance against the societal structures that exclude her. Similarly, Tilo's involvement in political activism reflects her resistance to the oppressive forces in her life. (170)

Due to its nonlinear structure, the narrative is open rather than closed, and more than one person's voice can be heard across time and space. In this way, the reader is invited to reconstruct all these scattered voices. It underlines that the subordinated are not three-dimensional beings resigned to history but people of the present constantly resisting and contesting the forces of power that try to mute them.

The essence of intertextuality in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is that it does not allow the disappearance of the underprivileged by mean of stealing their narratives. These works that Roy brings into the discourse of her work give the visibility to the silent in the socio-political narrative. "turning history into mythology and mythology into history" (401). Whether through history, mythology or heritage traditions, these elements help in advancing the story in a way that goes against the dominant narratives that have historically oppressed the voices of the marginalized. Often subtle and multi-layered, the intertextuality pointers also serve to encourage the readers to interpret the text in a crucial way.

In embedding characters within a dense intertextual fabric, Roy is making it possible for the reader to understand the relationship between individual challenges and macro social problems and in this way to redefine one's images of identity, belonging and movement. These intertexts do not only operate within the boundaries of the novel, but in the wider sense, bringing the reader face to face with modern day Indian eco and the contemporary problems faced by the downtrodden. These texts do not only serve as a backdrop since they are actively involved in the acts of resistance the characters engage in.

In the world of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Roy renders the socio-political constitutes: "Roy embellishes how the Indian population has been abandoned and hegemonized by the political superiors after India and Pakistan partition in 1947" (192), state S. Priyadarshini and R. Rajavelu. And the literary textures in a way that they are perceptible and feel alive castrated. The reverberations of extensive literary texts and cultural-social practices crystallize the silenced voices that Roy brings in to the forefront. Owning a novel which is informational and multi-faceted is evaluated to be an intricate task since it brings in the culture alongside religious ideas and prose masterpieces. Roy also strips away the tenor one dimensional facet of the narrative by embedding multitude of layered intertextuality into it. This in turn compels the reader to further think outside the box and fetch something different from the book rather just an array of one-dimensional texture and narratives.

Thus, the novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, authored by Arundhati Roy, employs both polyphony and multivocality to subvert dominant narratives regarding identity,

belonging and power. In her novel, Roy employs an uneven, nonlinear narrative in order to centre the experiences of characters such as Anjum and Tilo, whose lives intersect with larger socio-political themes of caste, gender, religion, and environmental degradation. “Through its richly drawn characters and evocative settings, the novel offers a poignant critique of contemporary societal issues” (Khan and Rema 171) Such a narrative is not monological and allows diverse perspectives to exist together and at times even contradict with one another, thereby providing a rich critique of the power relations that currently exist in India.

Roy tends to adopt specific methodologies when dealing with storytelling in her novels. For instance, Roy reflects on more fractured identities by employing concrete storytelling which best describes an identity, as it exposes more than one trauma, especially for those whose voices have been silenced. Fragmented narratives tell the stories of those who have been disregarded and remember their trauma. Roy is active against creating a singular story as she prefers a narrative that truly reflects the lives, complexities and fractured identities of her characters over the one prefixed on them.

With regards to socio-political critique, the research observes that the polyphonic structure of the novel facilitates critique of the caste gender religion and ecological degradation nexus. The characters’ stories go beyond being individualistic accounts to being macro-sociological accounts explaining the social and political systems that operate for inequity. The novel is against these social structures by way of the multitude of voices presented in it which helps in building and fighting against the oppressive social order.

In conclusion, the findings of this research detail that Roy’s *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is an example of literature as a tool for social change. Intertextuality, multi-narrative and multi-time nature of the novel reconstructs reality which is devoid of hegemony and gives voice to the voiceless. This gives the novel a sophisticated quality whereby it is able to address broader socio-political issues embedded within the socio-political model of oppression. It renders itself as a crucial piece of literature with resistance.

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