

**Narrating the Fragmented Nation: Polyphony and Counter-History in
*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness***

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Abstract

This article examines the polyphonic narrative structure of Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* through Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of polyphony and argues that the novel represents the Indian nation as fragmented, heterogeneous and ideologically contested. Rather than presenting a single authoritative perspective, Roy constructs a dialogic narrative space that accommodates multiple voices, including hijras, lower-caste communities, civilians, Naxalites, militants, army officers, political activists and ordinary citizens. Characters such as Anjum, Saddam Hussein, Tilo, Musa and the mother of Miss Jebeen the Second embody diverse experiences of caste oppression, displacement, militarisation, political violence and social marginalisation. The article further analyses how Roy humanises conflicting political positions without fully privileging either state authority or insurgent resistance, thereby resisting simplistic ideological binaries. Through fragmented narration, shifting perspectives and narrative multiplicity, the novel reflects the fractured realities of contemporary India and challenges monologic constructions of nationalism. The study contends that polyphony in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* functions not merely as a narrative technique but as a political and ethical strategy that foregrounds coexistence, contradiction and competing truths within the postcolonial nation-state.

Keywords: Polyphony; Narrative Multiplicity; Fragmented Nationhood; Marginalised Voices; Political Violence; Dialogism; Narrative Fragmentation.

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* engages with the social and political realities of contemporary India through a narrative that moves across Kashmir, Delhi, graveyards, protest sites and spaces shaped by violence, displacement and surveillance. The novel brings together voices that remain outside dominant nationalist discourse, including hijras, civilians, militants, intelligence officials, political activists, lower-caste individuals and army officers. Rather than presenting a singular interpretation of the nation, Roy allows conflicting perspectives and experiences to coexist within the same narrative framework. Questions of power, surveillance, nationalism and social exclusion emerge through characters such as Anjum, Saddam Hussein, Tilo, Musa, Biplab Dasgupta, Naga and the mother of Miss Jebeen the Second, each positioned differently within structures of authority, violence and resistance. The novel also gestures towards caste hierarchy and class inequality, particularly through Saddam Hussein's experiences of humiliation and discrimination. Roy's representation of India therefore resists fixed ideological positions and foregrounds the tensions and contradictions embedded within the postcolonial nation-state.

As Mikhail Bakhtin argues in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, the polyphonic novel contains "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices" (Bakhtin 6), a feature that becomes central to Roy's narrative method. The novel avoids reducing political conflict into simplistic binaries such as victim and oppressor or nation and anti-nation. Civilians, military personnel, state officials and insurgents are all granted narrative presence, creating a space where ideological positions remain contested rather than conclusively resolved. This complexity becomes evident in the recurring assertion that "there was no slogan that did not contain a trap" (Roy 303), reflecting the instability of political certainty within the text. Drawing upon Bakhtin's concept of polyphony and Homi K. Bhabha's argument that "nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time" (Bhabha 1), this article details how Roy employs multiple narrative voices, shifting perspectives and fragmented narration to challenge monologic nationalism and represent India as heterogeneous, divided and continuously negotiated.

Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of dialogism and heteroglossia become central to understanding the dynamics of Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Bakhtin argues that language is never neutral but always shaped by competing social and ideological forces. In *The Dialogic Imagination*, he observes that language is "stratified into languages that are socio-ideological" (Bakhtin 271), suggesting that every form of speech carries traces of class, politics, religion and power. Roy's novel reflects this heteroglossic quality through

the coexistence of bureaucratic reports, military terminology, political slogans, Urdu expressions, media discourse, religious speech and intimate personal narration. These linguistic registers do not merge into a unified ideological perspective; instead, they remain in continuous interaction and tension. Bakhtin further argues that “the word in language is half someone else’s” (293), indicating that language always contains echoes of other voices and social positions. Roy employs this dialogic quality to construct a text in which no single perspective gains complete authority. The novel consequently destabilises fixed meanings and exposes the contradictions embedded within political and national discourse.

This multiplicity becomes significant in relation to the idea of nationhood itself. Homi Bhabha contends that the nation is narrated through “the ambivalent, heterogeneous time of modernity” (Bhabha 2), suggesting that national identity is continually negotiated through competing histories, memories and cultural differences rather than through stable or unified foundations. Benedict Anderson similarly describes the nation as an “imagined political community” (Anderson 6), highlighting the narrative processes through which collective identity is constructed and sustained. Roy challenges such unified constructions of the nation by drawing attention to experiences shaped by militarisation, displacement and political conflict. Edward Said’s assertion that “none of us is outside or beyond geography” (Said 7) further illuminates the novel’s engagement with contested spaces such as Kashmir, where geography itself becomes deeply political. Stuart Hall’s observation that identity is “a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’” (Hall 225) is equally relevant to Roy’s characters, whose identities remain fluid and continually reshaped by violence, migration and exclusion. The coexistence of these diverse perspectives transforms the novel into a contested narrative space where ideological certainty remains unstable and unresolved.

The fragmented structure of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* reflects the fractured social and political realities of contemporary India. Rather than following a linear chronology or unified plot, the novel moves through interruptions, temporal shifts and multiple narrative strands that intersect across different geographical and ideological spaces. The narrative transitions between Kashmir, Delhi, graveyards, protest sites and moments of personal memory, creating what Fredric Jameson describes as a “properly allegorical process” (Jameson 73), where literary form becomes inseparable from historical and political conditions. Roy’s fragmented structure therefore mirrors the instability, violence and discontinuities shaping contemporary India. Her refusal to maintain chronological order

disrupts conventional narrative coherence and challenges the idea of a singular national reality.

The novel's structure is further shaped by parallel narrative worlds such as Anjum's life within the graveyard community, the Tilo-Musa relationship, the experiences of state surveillance and the violence surrounding Kashmir. These narrative strands do not fully converge into a singular resolution but continue to exist alongside one another, preserving ideological and emotional tensions. Linda Hutcheon argues that postmodern narratives challenge "the notion of a single and centralised truth" (Hutcheon 12), suggesting that fragmented storytelling resists authoritative versions of history and reality. This becomes evident in Roy's narrative method, where competing experiences and memories remain unresolved rather than absorbed into a unified perspective. Similarly, Jean-François Lyotard's critique of "grand narratives" (Lyotard xxiv) questions universal truths and totalising explanations. Roy's fragmented form reflects this scepticism by resisting fixed ideas of nationalism, political authority and historical certainty. The structure therefore functions not merely as an aesthetic technique but as a political mode of representation that captures the dislocation, uncertainty and contradictions embedded within the postcolonial nation-state.

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* constructs a polyphonic narrative space through the coexistence of sharply different social, political and ideological voices. The novel accommodates hijras, Kashmiris, lower-caste individuals, civilians, militants, army officers, intelligence officials and political dissidents without subordinating them to a singular moral or political framework. Mikhail Bakhtin argues that in the polyphonic novel "a character's word about himself and his world is just as fully weighted as the author's word" (Bakhtin 69), suggesting that characters function as autonomous ideological voices rather than passive objects of narration. Roy similarly allows divergent perspectives to coexist without resolving them into a single authoritative truth. This becomes evident in the observation that "we know only too well how people deal with people they don't understand" (Roy 88), a statement that reflects the exclusion and hostility experienced by marginalised communities within dominant political and social structures. The novel therefore resists simplistic binaries such as nation and anti-nation or victim and oppressor. Anjum's existence itself destabilises rigid social and political categories, reflected in the statement that she "lived outside the folds of the gendered world" (23). Roy thereby positions marginal identity not as peripheral to the nation but as central to understanding its exclusions

and contradictions. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question, "Can the subaltern speak?" (Spivak 271), becomes particularly relevant here, as Roy creates narrative space for voices frequently silenced within dominant nationalist discourse.

This polyphonic quality becomes especially significant in the novel's representation of political conflict and state power. Through Kashmir, Roy depicts militarisation, surveillance and displacement while simultaneously revealing the anxieties embedded within institutions of authority. The narrative does not present political violence through a singular ideological lens but allows conflicting experiences and interpretations to coexist simultaneously. Edward Said argues that "human experience is historically and culturally produced" (Said 8), a perspective reflected in Roy's refusal to isolate individuals from the political structures shaping their lives. The novel's heteroglossic quality further intensifies this multiplicity. Bureaucratic reports, military discourse, Urdu expressions, slogans, prayers, journalistic language and intimate conversations intersect continuously throughout the text. Bakhtin describes heteroglossia as the "dialogic interaction of languages" (Bakhtin 358), where competing social voices challenge linguistic and ideological uniformity. Roy captures this fractured coexistence through the assertion that "another world was not only possible, she was on her way" (Roy 98), a line that gestures towards alternative political and social possibilities emerging from marginalised spaces. The novel's engagement with fragmentation and plurality becomes even more explicit in the reflection, "How to tell a shattered story? By slowly becoming everybody. No. By slowly becoming everything" (442), where fractured narration becomes inseparable from divided histories, shifting identities and multiple voices. Homi Bhabha's observation that cultural meaning emerges through "the overlap and displacement of domains of difference" (Bhabha 2) further illuminates Roy's narrative method, where conflicting voices and linguistic registers remain in constant interaction. Through this multiplicity, the novel becomes a contested narrative space in which power, identity and resistance remain unstable and continuously negotiated.

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* challenges official narratives of nationalism by foregrounding lived experiences excluded from state-centred histories of the nation. Rather than presenting history as unified or authoritative, the novel reconstructs the nation through memories of displacement, grief, militarisation and political violence. Roy repeatedly exposes the distance between official democratic rhetoric and the realities experienced by marginalised communities, particularly in Kashmir and other conflict-ridden spaces. Michel Foucault argues that counter-history disrupts dominant structures of truth by

introducing “discontinuity into our very being” (Foucault 88), a perspective reflected in Roy’s reconstruction of suppressed histories and silenced experiences. Through surveillance, military occupation and state control, the novel reveals how power operates within everyday life and shapes individual existence. The recurring presence of checkpoints, intelligence networks and institutional violence exposes the exclusions embedded within nationalist discourse. Roy captures this atmosphere of fear and erasure in the observation that “death flew in, on tiny paper parachutes” (Roy 23), where violence becomes normalised within ordinary civilian life.

The novel also presents storytelling and memory as forms of political resistance against silence and historical erasure. Personal testimonies, conversations and recollections preserve experiences that official histories frequently overlook or suppress. Shoshana Felman argues that testimony is “a mode of access to that truth” (Felman and Laub 16), suggesting that narrative itself becomes an ethical act of witnessing. Roy similarly demands ethical engagement from the reader by drawing attention to voices shaped by trauma, displacement and exclusion. The statement that “to account for the history of annihilation in Kashmir would mean giving a statistic shape to a story” (Roy 156) reflects the novel’s resistance to reducing suffering into abstract political data. Instead of presenting violence through detached statistics or official reports, Roy foregrounds intimate experiences of grief, fear and survival. Roy further captures the emotional residue of political violence in the observation that “every massacre becomes a landmark. What gets lost in the process is the history of the people who died” (181), suggesting how official histories erase individual suffering beneath political narratives and public memory. Edward Said’s assertion that “memory and its representations touch very significantly upon questions of identity” (Said 176) further illuminates the novel’s engagement with remembrance as a form of resistance. Through these counter-histories and memory narratives, Roy transforms storytelling into a political act that contests state authority and preserves marginalised histories within the postcolonial nation-state.

In conclusion, Arundhati Roy’s *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* employs polyphonic narration to challenge monologic constructions of nationalism and to foreground voices frequently excluded from official political discourse. Through fragmented storytelling, shifting perspectives and heteroglossic language, the novel resists unified representations of the Indian nation-state and instead presents India as heterogeneous, ideologically divided and continuously negotiated. Rather than offering definitive political

resolutions, Roy invites readers to confront the complexity of competing histories, identities and memories that shape the postcolonial nation.

Polyphony in the novel, therefore, functions not merely as a literary technique but as a political and ethical intervention that creates space for competing histories, memories and lived experiences. By foregrounding marginalised voices and counter-histories, Roy transforms narrative multiplicity into a form of resistance against authoritarian and exclusionary forms of nationalism. The fragmented structure of the text mirrors the fractured realities of contemporary India, where questions of identity, violence, belonging and state power remain unresolved. Through its dialogic and polyphonic form, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* ultimately reimagines the nation not as a stable or unified entity but as a contested space shaped by contradiction, diversity and continuous negotiation.

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