

Voices from the Margins: Subaltern Women's Resistance and Counter-Hegemony in the Fiction of Arundhati Roy

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Abstract - Arundhati Roy's fiction offers a compelling literary interrogation of subaltern women's lives within the intersecting structures of caste, patriarchy, religion, and state power in contemporary India. This paper examines *The God of Small Things* (1997) and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) to analyse how Roy represents subaltern women not merely as victims of systemic injustice but as agents of resistance operating within restrictive socio-political frameworks. Drawing upon the theoretical insights of Subaltern Studies and intersectional feminism—particularly the works of Antonio Gramsci, Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Kimberlé Crenshaw—the study explores how resistance emerges in varied, context-specific forms. The analysis focuses on Ammu and Rahel in *The God of Small Things* and Anjum, Tilottama, and Revathy in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. It demonstrates that Roy articulates resistance through both overt acts of defiance and subtle strategies such as silence, withdrawal, ethical solidarity, and alternative community formation. Ammu's transgression of caste and gender norms, Rahel's emotional detachment, Anjum's reimagining of inclusive social space, Tilottama's political witnessing, and Revathy's revolutionary consciousness collectively reveal the plurality of subaltern resistance. By situating individual narratives within broader historical and political contexts—ranging from caste oppression and domestic patriarchy to communal violence and state militarisation—Roy's novels foreground the evolving nature of subaltern women's agency. This study argues that Roy's fiction redefines resistance as relational, intersectional, and deeply embedded in lived experience, thereby offering a nuanced counter-narrative to dominant representations of marginalised women in Indian literature.

Keywords: Subaltern Women, Resistance, Intersectionality, Counter-Hegemony, Arundhati Roy.

I. INTRODUCTION

Arundhati Roy's literary oeuvre is profoundly embedded in the socio-political realities of contemporary India. Beyond her political and intellectual activism, her novels—*The God of Small Things* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*—foreground the lived experiences of marginalised individuals, particularly women. In this regard, Roy's narrative concerns resonate with Gayatri Chakrabarti Spivak's emphasis on the subaltern in nationalist historiography and her resistance to elitist biases in historical writing (1998: 445). In *The God of Small Things*, characters such as Ammu and Rahel confront and destabilise entrenched patriarchal structures. Ammu challenges societal conventions by marrying outside her caste and later entering into an inter-caste relationship, while Rahel rejects prescribed gender norms, leading a life that defies conventional expectations of womanhood.

Similarly, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* portrays the victimisation and struggles of subaltern women against a backdrop of historical and political upheavals, spanning from the Partition of India to the early years of the twenty-first century. The novel presents marginal female characters who resist injustice by interrogating and transgressing social, political, and cultural norms in their pursuit of a more inclusive and humane world. Anjum, for instance, is ostracised by her family and society due to her intersex identity, yet she repudiates normative gender roles and leaves her home to create a space that embraces the neglected and marginalised. Tilottama dedicates herself to the liberation and welfare of Kashmiri women, while Revathy actively struggles for the rights and freedom of exploited working-class women.

This study is guided by the research question of how subaltern women resist injustice in Roy's selected narratives and how the modes of their resistance differ across the texts. Both *The God of Small Things* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* vividly represent the harsh realities faced by marginalised, victimised, and exploited women under oppressive social, cultural, religious, and political structures in India. While these women resist injustice by questioning and rebelling against established norms and values, the nature and forms of their resistance vary significantly between the two novels. Consequently, Roy's works offer distinct yet complementary portrayals of subaltern women's resistance within the specific socio-historical contexts of contemporary India.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Arundhati Roy's literary writings engage deeply with critical issues such as caste, gender, identity, and socio-political injustice. Her novels *The God of Small Things* (1997) and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) vividly reflect India's complex socio-political realities, firmly establishing her position within contemporary literary discourse. A substantial body of scholarship has examined these texts for their innovative narrative strategies, ecological concerns, postcolonial perspectives, and intersectional critiques of power and domination.

Scholars such as Nair (2002) emphasise Roy's powerful representation of caste-based oppression, particularly through the doomed relationship between Ammu and Velutha, a Paravan. Nair contends that Roy subverts rigid caste hierarchies by foregrounding the humanity of those relegated to society's margins. In a similar vein, Chacko (2005) examines Roy's critique of patriarchy through Ammu's constrained life, shaped by restrictive gender norms. The novels' non-linear narrative structure and fragmented temporality have also drawn critical attention. Banerjee (2008) argues that these narrative techniques mirror the fractured lives of the characters and their attempts to negotiate personal trauma alongside collective memory. Additionally, D'Cruz (2010) highlights Roy's fusion of personal and political histories, suggesting that her depiction of postcolonial Kerala functions as a microcosm of broader Indian socio-political realities.

Roy's later novel significantly broadens her thematic concerns to encompass nationalism, environmental destruction, and religious fundamentalism. Ahmed (2018) observes that the novel's interconnected narrative strands reflect the interdependence of socio-political struggles in contemporary India. The character of Anjum, a transgender woman who establishes a refuge for the marginalized, has attracted particular scholarly interest. Sharma (2019), for instance, argues that through Anjum, Roy re-envisioned alternative forms of community and resistance amid systemic oppression.

Religious fundamentalism constitutes a major thematic strand in Roy's work, with critics noting her exposure of how Hindu nationalist ideologies marginalize religious minorities. Iyer (2018) demonstrates how Roy foregrounds the persecution of minority communities during events such as the Gujarat riots and the Kashmir conflict. Similarly, Maerhofer (2015) argues that Roy critiques the exclusionary impulses of a Hindu-majoritarian society that restricts Muslim rights in its pursuit of a Hindu nation-state. Expanding on this, Joshi (2020) suggests that Roy's representation of communal violence and state-sponsored repression challenges dominant nationalist narratives by privileging the voices of the oppressed.

Although Roy's portrayal of marginalized women highlights their oppression, several scholars contend that these characters are not depicted merely as passive victims. Gopinath (2019) characterises Roy's women as transgressive figures who resist social constraints. Islam (2020) observes that *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* begins and ends in the same graveyard, which becomes a sanctuary for humans and animals alike, symbolising the dismantling of gender hierarchies within Roy's critique of patriarchy (p. 37). Such interpretations point to an emerging consciousness of injustice among Roy's characters; however, they often overlook the evolving nature of subaltern women's resistance within India's changing socio-political contexts.

Overall, existing scholarship on Roy's fiction provides valuable insights into the intersecting forms of marginalisation experienced by subaltern women, yet it tends to prioritise victimhood over agency. This paper extends earlier studies by focusing on how

subaltern women in Roy's novels actively resist systemic injustice, thereby offering a more nuanced understanding of resistance and empowerment among marginalised groups in contemporary India.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Antonio Gramsci originally employed the term *subaltern* to refer to working-class populations who existed outside the structures of power and authority. He argued that such groups possessed little or no agency and were therefore subjected to external domination. Their social roles were routinely ignored, and their lives rendered politically insignificant, leading Gramsci to describe subaltern history as "necessarily fragmented and episodic" (Gramsci, 1992, p. 55). He further observed that subaltern groups are frequently positioned in opposition not only to the hegemonic class but also, at times, to other subaltern groups themselves (Gramsci, 1992, p. 53). For Gramsci, hegemony operates through both material conditions and ideological persuasion, securing dominance by eliciting the consent of the ruled rather than relying solely on coercion.

In *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci elaborates the concept of hegemony as a form of cultural leadership and ideological control, while simultaneously advancing the idea of *counter-hegemony*—a rival ideological force that challenges and destabilizes dominant power structures (Im, 1991). Counter-hegemony emerges when subaltern groups contest the ideological foundations of the ruling elite, thereby questioning their political and economic authority. This process corresponds to "the way people develop ideas and discourse to challenge dominant assumptions, beliefs and established patterns of behavior" (Cox & Schilthuis, 2012, p. 1), offering subaltern groups a critical lens through which to recognize and resist dominant cultural norms.

Counter-hegemonic practices take shape as marginalized communities become aware of their oppression, resist exclusion, and retract their consent to be governed by hegemonic forces (Hoare & Sperber, 2015). Gramsci's theoretical framework has been widely applied in literary criticism, particularly in the analysis of writers such as Arundhati Roy, whose female characters embody counter-hegemonic resistance by confronting systems of injustice.

Through acts of resistance, subaltern figures challenge the prevailing social order, imagine alternative modes of existence, and disrupt entrenched ideological and political structures, thereby refusing to acquiesce to domination (Zembylas, 2013; Adamson, 1983).

Central to this counter-hegemonic struggle is the role of the "organic intellectual," who facilitates critical awareness and mobilization among subaltern groups, often at considerable personal risk (Adamson, 1983; Hoare & Sperber, 2015). Gramsci maintained that once subaltern groups attain an understanding of their marginalized condition, they can work toward a more equitable and integrated social order. Such groups, he argues, develop a "critical self-consciousness which will enable them to overthrow the existing order and create a morally integrated society" (Femia, 1987, p. 56). Complementing this perspective, Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality highlights how overlapping identities of gender and race compound marginalization. In "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," Crenshaw observes that "because of their intersectional identity as both women and people of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one or the other, the interests and experiences of women of color are frequently marginalized within both" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1241).

IV. SUBALTERN WOMEN AND SYSTEMS OF OPPRESSION IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S FICTION

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* present a penetrating critique of the structural injustices embedded within Indian society. Her narratives foreground subaltern women whose lives are shaped by intersecting systems of caste, patriarchy, religion, and state power. Rather than depicting marginalisation as a singular experience, Roy situates her characters within layered social hierarchies that produce complex forms of exclusion and vulnerability. In *The God of Small Things*, caste operates as a rigid and violent social structure that determines access to dignity, love, and justice. Velutha's position as a Paravan reveals how caste hierarchy criminalises transgression, while the consequences of his relationship with Ammu expose the brutal enforcement of social boundaries. Caste oppression in the novel functions not merely as a

social code but as an internalised ideology sustained through fear, silence, and complicity.

Patriarchy further compounds subaltern women's marginalisation by restricting education, mobility, sexuality, and economic agency. Female characters are subjected to familial surveillance and moral policing, reinforcing gendered expectations that privilege male authority. These constraints are normalised within domestic spaces, illustrating how oppression is reproduced through everyday practices rather than solely through overt violence. Roy's later novel expands this critique to include state-sponsored violence, religious fundamentalism, and gender normativity. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* situates individual suffering within national and historical contexts, particularly through communal riots, militarisation, and the marginalisation of minorities. Together, both novels reveal how systemic oppression operates across private and public spheres, shaping the lives of subaltern women in enduring ways.

Gendered Resistance and Counter-Hegemony in *The God of Small Things*

Ammu's narrative exemplifies the gendered nature of subaltern resistance within a patriarchal and caste-bound society. As a divorced woman in a Syrian Christian household, she is denied education, economic rights, and social legitimacy. Her marginalisation reflects what Spivak identifies as the silencing of women within patriarchal discourses that deny them subjectivity and voice. Despite these constraints, Ammu resists through acts of defiance that challenge dominant norms. Her decision to leave her family, marry without approval, and later abandon an abusive marriage demonstrates a refusal to accept patriarchal authority. These actions align with Gramsci's notion of counter-hegemony, as Ammu withdraws consent from social structures that seek to control her body and choices.

Ammu's inter-caste relationship with Velutha represents the most radical form of her resistance. By transgressing caste boundaries, she challenges the ideological foundations of social hierarchy upheld by both religious and familial institutions. Although the relationship is violently punished, it stands as a powerful assertion of agency against caste-based

domination. Rahel's resistance, in contrast, is quieter and rooted in emotional withdrawal. As the child of an inter-caste marriage, she inherits marginalisation and experiences neglect within her own family. Her silence and detachment function as subtle resistance, refusing assimilation into a system that denies her belonging. Together, Ammu and Rahel illustrate differing yet interconnected modes of gendered resistance within oppressive social frameworks.

Intersectional Resistance and Political Consciousness in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness broadens Roy's exploration of resistance by situating subaltern women within contemporary political and communal conflicts. The novel foregrounds characters whose identities intersect across gender, sexuality, religion, class, and region, revealing how oppression intensifies at these intersections. Resistance, consequently, assumes diverse forms shaped by historical and political realities. Anjum's narrative challenges rigid gender binaries and social exclusion faced by transgender individuals. Rejected by her family and society, she responds by creating an inclusive space for the marginalised. This act of community-building redefines resistance as a constructive process that imagines alternative modes of belonging beyond normative social structures.

Tilottama embodies ethical resistance through solidarity with victims of political violence, particularly in Kashmir. Her own ambiguous social origins and inherited stigma enable her to empathise with silenced communities. Rather than seeking representation, she resists by witnessing injustice and aligning herself with those erased from dominant nationalist narratives, reinforcing Spivak's critique of representational politics. Revathy's narrative highlights the intersection of gender, class, and state violence. Influenced by revolutionary ideology and shaped by the oppression she witnesses, particularly against Adivasi communities, she develops a political consciousness that challenges state authority. Her testimony exposes systemic exploitation while also affirming the emergence of resistance among marginalised groups. Through these characters, Roy presents resistance as collective, intersectional, and deeply political.

V. CONCLUSION

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* provide a sustained critique of the socio-political structures that marginalise women in contemporary India. Through her nuanced portrayal of subaltern female characters, Roy exposes how caste hierarchy, patriarchy, religious fundamentalism, and state power operate together to produce layered and enduring forms of injustice. Her fiction reveals that oppression is not confined to public institutions alone but is deeply entrenched within familial, social, and cultural practices. At the same time, Roy resists reducing subaltern women to passive victims. Characters such as Ammu and Rahel demonstrate that resistance may emerge through intimate and understated acts, including personal defiance, emotional withdrawal, and refusal to internalise dominant norms. Ammu's challenge to caste and gender boundaries and Rahel's inherited marginality underscore how resistance can be both confrontational and silent, shaped by circumstance and vulnerability.

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Roy broadens the scope of resistance by situating subaltern women within national histories of violence and exclusion. Anjum's creation of an inclusive community, Tilottama's ethical solidarity with Kashmiris, and Revathy's revolutionary consciousness illustrate resistance as collective, political, and intersectional. These narratives reflect the evolving nature of subaltern agency in postcolonial India. The theoretical frameworks of Gramsci, Guha, Spivak, and Crenshaw enable a deeper understanding of how consent, hegemony, silence, and intersecting identities shape both oppression and resistance. Roy's fiction exemplifies counter-hegemonic struggle by foregrounding alternative ways of imagining justice, belonging, and humanity. Ultimately, this study affirms that Roy's novels contribute significantly to contemporary literary discourse by redefining resistance as a lived, relational, and ethically grounded practice. By centring subaltern women's voices and experiences, Roy challenges dominant historiographies and offers a powerful literary vision of resistance within an unequal social order.

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