



## Politics of Gender Discrimination in the Writings of Arundhati Roy

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### Abstract

**Aim:** *This paper aims to find the view of author towards the social discrimination in our society that is sketched in in her novels; The God of Small Things and The Ministry of Utmost Happiness. This paper tries to discuss the State of women and transgender and crisis of their identity in society brilliantly pictured in the novels of Arundhati Roy. The women and the transgenders are pictured as the marginalized and the Subaltern in the novels of Arundhati Roy and they are the target groups of the author in her two novels: The God of Small Things and The Ministry of utmost Happiness. Arundhati Roy: a renowned Indian author, has made a significant mark in the realm of contemporary literature with her thought-provoking novels.*

**Methodology and Approach:** *The methodology followed is primary and qualitative method. This paper delves into the thematic exploration of*

*marginalized voices in her works, focusing on the intersectionality of identity, power, and resistance.*

**Outcome:** *By employing a postmodernist lens, this study analyzes how Roy's novels, particularly *The God of Small Things* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, challenge traditional literary and social norms while amplifying the voices of the marginalized.*

**Conclusion and suggestions:** *This paper tries to find the polity of the author related to gender discrimination in Indian society along with other discrimination like caste, culture and, religion. In her two novels Arundhati Roy presents a brilliant picture of male dominated Indian society where women are treated as subaltern.*

**Keywords:** Postmodernism, marginalized, transgender, Gender discrimination, social outcaste

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The politics of gender discrimination in the writings of Arundhati Roy provides a compelling lens through which to examine her critique of Indian society, particularly in the context of caste, class, and gender. Roy's novels, such as *The God of Small Things* (1997) and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), as well as her numerous essays, delve into the ways in which women navigate oppressive structures and the intersectionality of their struggles. In *The God of Small Things*, Roy critiques the patriarchal norms of a Syrian Christian family in

Kerala, exposing the harsh realities of gender discrimination and its devastating impacts on women's lives. The character of Ammu, for instance, suffers severely due to her transgressions against societal norms, particularly those related to her relationships and sexuality. This reflects Roy's critical stance on how gender and caste intersect to oppress women in India, emphasizing the cultural policing of female sexuality and autonomy.

Similarly, in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Roy expands her exploration of gender by focusing on marginalized communities, including transgender individuals. Through the character of Anjum, a hijra (transgender woman), Roy critiques the systemic discrimination and violence faced by those who do not conform to traditional gender norms. The novel not only portrays the personal struggles of gender non-conformity but also situates these experiences within the broader socio-political landscape of India, marked by religious intolerance, caste violence, and political corruption. This highlights Roy's broader critique of how institutionalized systems of power perpetuate gender discrimination and marginalization.

Roy's non-fiction writings further bolster her critique of gender discrimination by directly engaging with political and social issues in India. Her essays often intersect gender with issues of nationalism, militarism, and economic inequality, arguing that these factors collectively contribute to the subjugation of women and other marginalized genders. Roy's feminist perspective is deeply intertwined with her anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist viewpoints, illustrating how global and local systems of power mutually reinforce gender discrimination. Through her fiction and non-fiction, Roy consistently challenges readers to reconsider the social and political structures that uphold gender inequalities, advocating for a more inclusive and just society that recognizes and addresses the intersecting oppressions faced by women and gender minorities. Arundhati Roy is recognized as prominent Indian writer who writes for social issues. As a social

activist she always stands with contemporary social movement. Her social interest finds its explanation in her works. She emerged as a prominent literary figure in the late 20th century, garnering attention for her distinctive narrative style and her commitment to social justice causes. Her novels are rich tapestries of storytelling, exploring the lives and struggles of marginalized individuals in India. This paper aims to unravel the postmodernist dimensions of Roy's novels by examining the ways in which she portrays the voices of the marginalized like women, Dalits and the transgenders. This paper tries to discuss the gender discrimination in a orthodox and narrow male dominated society where women have a marginalized role and they are deprived of the basic rights of getting the education and are totally at the mercy of the men-folk.

In her two novels Roy presents the polity of social discrimination at the ground of gender. Her novels are replete with power struggles, both personal and political. The characters in her novels resist oppressive forces, be it the caste system, political corruption, or social injustice. Through her characters, Roy illustrates the postmodern notion that power is not fixed but continually negotiated. Notably, micro narrative focuses on individual narrative and that too often focuses on marginalized in the society. It brings out their struggle, survival and their helplessness. In the society marginalized people are being thrown out into the chasm of misfortune and suffering. The different class stratification of the society into various racial and ethno-social categories have made their life difficult. For the humiliation of being 'different' or 'marginalized' they also have to suffer from inferiority. Arundhati Roy, being an activist, writes about the sufferings and tortures that are happening with the marginalized. Her focus on individual sufferings, problems and concern in her novels is related with the aspect of micro-narrative. However, her concern about minorities can be traced in many ways.

Roy depicts the dark sides of a multicultural country through her writings. There are people from different castes and religions in India. The different religious beliefs and caste ideologies sometimes fail to make a balance and end up in violence. Roy exhibits this notion and shows the maltreatment happening with the lower-class people in society. Most often clash is between Muslims and Hindus but there are also clashes in between the same religion. Speaking about micro narrative, Roy in her novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* writes about the minorities of the society. She shows the difficulties of the transgender community, focuses on caste issues and the survival of woman in society, lastly the main subject of the novel that revolves around war in Kashmir where she shows how war and religion in different places can make people helpless. Further, in *The God of Small Things* the unaccepted love laws portray the barriers of patriarchal society and the suppression of lower-class people.

In the first place, Roy illustrates the lives of transgender, where she depicts their limitations, sufferings and deprivations. There is a complex history of transgender exclusion, ranging from the religious beliefs to the social mythical narratives. In this section, the unfortunate state of 'Hijra' community (transgenders) in Indian society will be discussed as portrayed in the novel. The key text *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* will be centered to explore the situations faced by them (transgender) on a daily basis.

Transgender people are individuals just like any other human beings but their dual biological identity makes it difficult for them to survive in the society. As Javeed Ahmed Raina states that, "In every society, they are marginalized and forced to live a life of an "other" (Raina 864). Their behavior and identity are not similar to the "normal" gender norms, and this is why they are not considered "normal" "man" or "woman". The protagonist Anjum faces this discrimination from his childhood, "He's a She. He's not a He or a She. He's a He and a She. She-He, He-She Hee! Hee! Hee!" (Roy, 12). The teasing becomes unbearable and

Anjum stops going to the music class. Being a child facing all these pains sometimes makes people traumatic. The transgender community constitutes marginalized section of the Indian society. They are denied proper education, health services and other human rights. Again, Raiana states about Indian Transgender situation in his article that, "Their education as well as public space is restricted or they themselves choose to live a life of seclusion due to certain limitations" (829) Roy in the novel portrays how everyday they are shunned by both family and society equally, and face severe identity crisis as they could not define themselves in the conventional male and female boundaries.

Concerning this, the novel starts with Anjum's surviving story as a 'hijra'. Anjum's life is not any different from other struggling transgender persons. She was named as Aftab after her birth and later becomes Anjum. Although Aftab's parents try to hide his original identity as a "transgender but Anjum chooses to live with that. Aftab is born with exceptional talent and passion for music but his physical complexity has been exposed when his voice changed. He is born with both male and female genitals which makes his identity more complex. He is not allowed to go to school for his complex identity. However, one day he discovers a 'hijra' outside their home and all Aftab wants is to be like her "Whatever she was, Aftab wanted to be her, he wanted to be her more than he wanted to be Borte Khatun" (Roy 19). Finally, Aftab manages to enter in Khwabgah and starts living with the other people. The restrictions of transgenders in the society are more visible to Anjum when she starts to live there. "In the next hour Anjum learned that the Holy Souls were a diverse lot and that the world of the Khwabgah was just as complicated, if not more so, than the Duniya" (27). The undergoing pain of being a hijra is seen in every individual living in Khwabgah. For instance, Bismillah is thrown out by her husband for not bearing him a child, even though it was her husband who was responsible for it, "Of course it never occurred to him that he might have been responsible for their childlessness" (21). Their whole

world is filled up with pain. Developments of society do not make any changes in their lives. As Nimmo Gorakhpuri says to Anjum that, nothing settles down for them, societal problems like: Price-rise, school admission, Hindu Muslim riot makes 'normal people' unhappy but it solves at times for them, whereas transgenders life remains the same with or without any changes of society. "The riot is inside us. The war is inside us. Indo-Pak is inside us. It will never settle down. It can't" (23). In their entire life time, they try to be happy but fail again and again. Hence, Nimmo refers to God to establish why God has created "hijras: "it was an experiment. He decided to create something, a living creature that is incapable of happiness. So, he made us" (23). The pains of social discourse make them (third gender) to hide their identity sometimes. They often seek to avoid desire altogether. Their public humiliation has no bound. These people try to ease the sufferings caused by social stratification through hiding themselves or putting their lives at the whims of others. The discussion of sexuality is considered taboo in any conservative society. Hence the matter of transgender is never discussed publicly which makes them to remain inside the walls of taboo.

Since, the matter is considered taboo, their struggles remain disclosed. Further, it is important for us to know that, being a transgender is not always a matter of biological fact. There are many transgenders who psychologically adopt the behavior of third gender. The society does not understand or accept the fact that being transgender or act like one is sometimes a psychological phenomenon rather than physical. Some people adopt to be like a female even being born as male. This is a freedom of choice to any individual which our society doesn't accept. Roy also portrays this phenomenon in the novel by depicting the character, Raiza. "She was a man who liked to dress in women's cloths" (22). Also, it is mentioned about her that: "However, she did not want to think of as a woman, but as a man who wanted to be a woman. She had stopped trying to explain the difference to people (including to Hijras) long ago" (22) Raiza is a

man but she chooses to be in the transgender community as she wanted herself to be a female in a man's body. In any conservative society telling the truth of gender complexity is difficult because it is a significant decision which people rarely accept. For instance, in 'Chitra' a dance drama by Rabindranath Tagore, where Chitrangada is the protagonist, who has been born as a female but brought up as a male. At one point of her life, she tries to have the feminine wiles to get loved by a man called Arjuna. She needs to pretend as a conventional woman for the fear of rejection. Rarely people welcome a woman as a warrior who is associated with the qualities deemed as 'manly qualities', hence Tagore makes a different approach to portray the stereotypical notion of our society which does not accept a woman as she is rather it makes her the way it wants her to be. As we see, to get an acceptance by the society they have to go through two transitions, one is social another is physical. The social transition is the fear of being accepted in the particular way one's body is altered with its mind. Lori B Girshick in his book states, "As a social construct, the gender binary attempts to force people to appear and behave in feminine or masculine ways not both or neither, or bits of one today and parts of another tomorrow" (Girshick 8). The existence for transgender in our society gets bitter and bitter as we cannot break down the binary construction of gender roles.

Further, Roy portrays minority based on religion, war and of course woman as one of a marginalized group. In this section the main concern is to depict the deprivation and sufferings of woman and of the innocent souls who suffers for war that Roy portrays in her novels. Starting with the novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, she depicts a revolutionary character Revathy. she plays an activist role but in her life time she survives being a woman and faces several caste problems. Revathy is the woman who works for the communist party of India (Maoist). In her letter to Dr. Azad Bhartiya, she expresses her sorrow about Indian culture that makes her suffer though her whole life and



makes her belong to a minority. Although Revathy's mother and father are from same caste, her father tortures her in many ways. This maltreatment of woman is seen common in any conservative society like India. Roy brings out this issue by portraying Ravethy's mother in the first place. "He wanted Mother to wear short dresses and do ballroom dancing" (418). When her mother refuses to do that he "tortured her with blades and complained she was not satisfying him" (419). This is both physical and psychological torture. It portrays the average life of Indian women who are being tortured both mentally and physically by their husbands and cannot get any support to stop being suppressed. Then again, her mother got pregnant but her father sent her mother back and married another woman. It is noticed significantly that woman in the lower-middle class society rarely get any chance to speak. Her mother could not take any stand for her own right because she belongs to a lower caste and class where her words for justice will never be counted. Even though her mother has no voice to ask for justice, she is given a narrative voice by Roy in her fiction. Furthermore, Revathy being a female communist party member has to suffer a lot. She works for the communist party as an activist where police hate them mostly because they are women. "Maximum hatred police had for women workers" (Roy 420).

Speaking about minorities, Roy does not only portray woman as victim for physical abuse, rather shows the other side of the society. For instance, in the novel *The God of Small Things*, she depicts child molestation by portraying the character, Estha. Orange Lemon drink Man molested Estha in the circus. "His hand closed tighter over Estha's. Tight and sweaty. And faster still" (104). By this Roy shows the molestation is not biased towards any specific gender; it can happen to anybody, anywhere for the lack of social concern. Coming back to the woman issue as minority. Roy fictionally constructs marginalized characters in the novel that can be traced by reading three characters: Mammachi, Ammu and Baby Kochamma. Also, the story revolves around Ammu and Velutha where one

is tormented by the patriarchal society and another is the victim of Indian caste system that makes him an 'untouchable. Moreover, she depicts different groups of minorities to show the individual sufferings. She shows the division of gender by portraying woman as minority and giving fictional figures to Mammachi, Ammu baby Kochamma. Rahel had to experience the sufferings as a child that her mother (Ammu) had gone through. Starting with Mammachi, she used to be the victim of physical abuse by Pappachi most often. "Pappachi beating Mammachi in the study" (Roy 48)

Besides, in the novel Roy shows that, the powerful people always exploit the weaker. Likewise, the touchable habitually dominate untouchable men. "Men dominate over the women. "...civilization's fear of nature, men's fear of women, power's fear of powerlessness" (Roy 292). The social structure of average Indian women is full of many ups and downs, always there is ifs and buts. The inflexible life of woman in a conservative society like India is socially constructed. We all have to break down this rigid view of woman to make our society a better place.

To sum up Arundhati Roy's novels offer a captivating journey into the postmodern landscape, where marginalized voices like discriminated people are given prominence, traditional narratives are deconstructed, and the boundaries of identity, power, and resistance are blurred. Through narrative experimentation, the interplay of history and memory, and a nuanced exploration of gender, sexuality, globalization, and ethics, Roy challenges readers to engage critically with the complex world she portrays. Her works serve as a testament to the enduring relevance of postmodern literature in addressing the multifaceted challenges of contemporary society. In our society there are two groups, the first is the crusher and another is the crushed in her novels Roy raises her voice for the sufferer as the women and the transgender. With some other marginalized groups at the ground of caste, culture and faith, Roy tries to give her voice to the

unvoiced transgenders and the deprived women. Roy's novels remain important texts for exploring the pain and agony of the subaltern.

In conclusion, the politics of gender discrimination in Arundhati Roy's writings offer a profound critique of the intersecting structures of power that perpetuate inequality and oppression in contemporary India. Roy's work, both in her fiction and non-fiction, challenges traditional patriarchal norms and exposes the multifaceted nature of gender discrimination, which is often compounded by factors such as caste, class, and religion. By giving voice to marginalized characters, particularly women and transgender individuals, Roy illuminates the pervasive injustices faced by those who exist outside societal norms. Her narratives compel readers to confront the realities of systemic oppression and consider the need for broader social and political change. Roy's writing not only portrays the struggles of her characters but also calls for an urgent reexamination of the societal structures that enforce gender discrimination, advocating for greater empathy, equity, and justice. Her work remains a vital contribution to discussions on gender, identity, and resistance in postcolonial literature.

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