



**Treatment of Poetic Justice as a Major Thematic Concern in
Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness***

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Abstract

Aim: *The present research paper is a modest attempt to find out the poetic justice prevalent in the novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* by Arundhati Roy. The present work manifests several instances of poetic justice through the rise of marginalized characters in society. Anjum, the transgender, Saddam Hussain (Dayachand), Tilottama, and Dr. Azad Bhartiya are the marginalized characters from the society. They undergo a lot of physical and mental agonies but fight their way out to rise above their obstacles. Major Amrik Singh is a vicious character, who is accused of extermination in Kashmir. He decimates himself and his whole*

family members. The whole story revolves around the struggle of marginalized characters and their development into better human beings.

Methodology and Approach: *The study is based on the novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) by Arundhati Roy as a primary text. It has employed the textual analysis approach to analyze the text of the novel.*

Outcome: *The novel presents many incidents of marginalization of the poor and weak people, as they suffer a lot at the hands of society. Yet they come out of such situations through their hard work and persistence for growth. The vicious characters are punished severely while good ones grow in flying colors.*

Conclusion and Suggestion: *The present paper concludes that the vicious characters have to pay the price of their sins; they cannot escape their fate, while the good characters would get the results of their persistence and efforts. The novel ends on a positive note, giving the feeling of happiness and hope to the readers.*

Keywords: *Poetic Justice, Marginalized, Extermination, Political Ideology, Social Alienation*

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Ms. Arundhati Roy is one of the great postmodernist writers of our country. She writes fiction as well as nonfiction. She won the prestigious Booker Prize for her very first novel *The God of Small Things* in 2007. As Ms. Rinki Verma in her research work *Socio-Political Perspective in the works of Arundhati Roy*, writes “Arundhati Roy became a major literary figure

overnight by winning the reputed ‘Booker Prize’ on her very first creation” (P.3). Her subsequent fiction, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* was published in 2017 after a gap of 20 years from her first novel. It is reflective of her intensive workmanship dedicated to her profession. She writes every word of her literary work after a thorough study. She propagates the rights of common poor people of villages, tribes, and lower castes, who are the most marginalized in society. In this novel her lead characters are marginalized e.g., Anjum a transgender and socially alienated person, Saddam Hussain a lower caste person, Tiltorama a secluded woman and Dr. Azad Bhartiya a politically targeted man.

Poetic justice is a literary term that depicts that virtue is rewarded, however, vice is punished. As M.H. Abrams quotes in his great work *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, “Poetic Justice was a term coined by Thomas Rymer, an English Critic of the later seventeenth century, to signify the distribution, at the end of a literary work, of earthly rewards and punishments in proportion to the virtue or vice of the various characters” (P.299). So, this term depicts that the virtuous characters may suffer and the unworthy may flourish in the beginning, but ultimately poetic justice is restored. The virtuous are rewarded and the sinful are punished. In the *ibid* novel, one can find various characters of the society, who undergo struggles and sufferings. The researcher is trying to find out the elements of poetic justice in fiction by in-depth analysis of these characters.

Anjum, the protagonist is transgender. His real name was Aftab. His parents were Jahanara Begum and Mulakat Ali. He had to face many problems due to his being transgender. He had a deep interest in studies as well as music and was very good at reciting *Bada Khayal* in Raag Yaman,

Durga and Bhairav. But other students used to tease him because of his feminine voice and movements. So, he had to leave his school and music class by Ustad Hameed. We can see how novelists portrayed this. “At first people were amused and even encouraging, but soon the snickering and teasing from other children began: He is a she. He is a He or a she. He is a He and a she. She-He, He-she Hee! Hee! Hee! When teasing became unbearable Aftab stopped going to his music classes” (P.12).

Aftab had to face many insults since his childhood because of his being transgender. He became very alienated from society and decided to move permanently to Khwabgah where other transgender lived. Although his mother insisted he come back to his family, he decided against it as he did not want to go back to society again to face those demons waiting for him. Finally, he decided to accept himself as she. He changed his name to Anjum and starts dressing in women's clothes. So, one can feel the pain, that she undergoes in society. She becomes a permanent resident of Khwabgah with full rights. Later she adopts an orphan girl whom she names Zainab. Zainab falls ill and she starts going to various Dargahs for blessings. She goes to Ahemadabad in Gujarat along with Zakir Miyan to visit the shrine of Wali Dakhani, a famous love poet. In Gujarat, the communal riots start and Zakir Miyan is liquidated by the rioters. But Anjum escapes because one of the rioters told them that killing a Hijra, brings bad luck. After coming back from Gujarat, her behavior changed because of the trauma she faced during the riots. Little Zainab does not like to sleep with her. So, the heartbroken Anjum leaves Khwabgah. She moves to the old Graveyard and starts living there in open. Later on, Mr. DD Gupta arranges to make a shade for her. Till then her life has seen only

struggles. After building shades she progresses in her life and starts making more rooms in Graveyard and names them Jannat Guest house.

So, one can see how many struggles, Anjum had faced in her life. She has to leave her family. She undergoes the trauma of communal riots at Gujarat. Further, she leaves her people from Khwabgah and lives in an open graveyard for a few months then she builds the shade for her. But she does not leave courage and keeps on fighting with life till she becomes self-dependent. After becoming self-dependent she starts helping other people from poorer backgrounds. She gives shelter to Saddam Hussain, Tilottama, Musa, and Miss Udaya Jebeen. She keeps on helping her fellow transgender from across the city without any motive. She earns a lot of respect from society for her generosity to poor people. So, we can see in her case that her good deeds are rewarded at the end, which is an example of poetic justice. As Ms. S. Leena Devanesam in her creative research paper “Role of Trauma in Transgender from Arundhati Roy’s *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*” quotes on the matter:

Even the protagonist knew that she was only Butcher’s Luck and the rest of her life remained precarious and reckless. Still, Roy’s heroine Anjum sprung out to upgrade their community’s lifestyle by showering an abundance of love and blessings on them. Roy, a notable writer focuses on the rhythms of unique personalities like Anjum a transgender, and a few of her community people. She has figured out a transwoman struggling to make a life for herself in Delhi (P.3668).

Another important character of mention was Saddam Hussain. When Anjum insists he tells his real story to her. His real name is Dayachand. He was born in a family of Chamars – skimmers in a village called Badshahpur in Haryana. His father used to carry dead carcasses of cows and buffalos for their skin. Whenever they carried the carcasses on their tempo, they had to pay a bribe to police officer Sehrawat for each turn. One day while carrying the carcass of a cow, Sehrawat asked for very high money as a bribe, which his father could not pay. Sehrawat arrested him on the charge of cow slaughter. People were returning from the Dussehra celebration. They heard about the cow slaughter and in a fit of anger, his father became a victim of mob lynching. It was a very unfortunate incident that people did not give his father a chance to say something in his defense. It shows the hypocrisy and apathy of society that searches for opportunities to punish the marginalized. A similar perspective has been discussed by the researcher in his earlier article, *Reflections of Social Hypocrisy in Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable* published in *Exploring Subalternity in Literature: Critical Perspective*.

People look for minor opportunities to punish the lower caste people but they do not hesitate to use the rigorous labor of such untouchables for their benefits. The prevalent social hypocrisy is the root cause of the agonies of such lower caste people (P.187).

After the unfortunate extermination of his father, Dayachand changes his name to Saddam Hussain and he intends to seek revenge on Sehrawat. Ms. Roy has mentioned the transformation of Dayachand into Saddam Hussein in following lines:

A few years after I came to Delhi, I was passing a TV showroom; one of the TVs in the window was playing the evening news. That's when I first saw the video of hanging of Saddam Hussein. I did not know anything about him but I was so impressed by the courage and dignity of man in the face of death. I decided to become a Muslim and take his name. I felt it would give me the courage to do what I had to do and face the consequences, like him (P.89-90).

He works as a truck cleaner, a security guard, and in various other types of jobs. But his sole aim is to avenge his father's death by exterminating Sehrawat. He comes to Anjum and lives on rent at her Jannat Guest house. With his help, Anjum starts the funeral services at Jannat Guest House. With so many experiences in life, he transforms into a mature person. He falls in love with Zainab and asks for the approval of Anjum for this new relationship. Anjum asks him the difficult question. Saddam replies that he has left the plan of revenge against Sehrawat and he gives the reason for it. Ms. Roy described their discussion beautifully. "Give me one reason why Zainab should marry a man who is waiting to commit a crime and then be hanged like Saddam Hussein of Iraq? Arre yaar, that's all over now. It has gone. My people have risen" (P.405). He further adds his comments on this matter. "Now, I don't need to kill him. You saw the video my people have risen they are fighting! What is one Sehrawat for us now? Nothing!" (P.406&407)

So, one can find that he has matured as a person. He is happy that his people the marginalized ones have risen. He mentions the example of Gujarat where furious Dalits parked trucks filled with carcasses in front of

the collector's office to raise their voice against their suppression. Famous human rights activist and writer Mari Marcel Thekaekara mentions this incident in her article *The Dalit Fight back at Una is India's Rosa Parks Moment* published in "The Wire":

They got 25-30 cows, loaded them into a pickup truck, and threw them in front of the collector's office. This is the first time everyone, all 32 Dalit sub-castes have come together united to fight injustice. That includes Valmikis, weavers, and leather workers. We are not just fighting for leather workers. We are fighting for all Dalits and all oppressed people. (The Wire)

Saddam Hussein understood that fighting against the suppressor's political ideology is more important than revenge against a particular person. He has struggled throughout his life but ultimately transformed into a person of higher understanding. He marries Zainab and lives a happier life. So, one can portray his life as a perfect example of poetic justice.

Another important character is Dr. Azad Bhartiya. He has just completed his 11 years 03 months 17 days of hunger strike at Jantar-Mantar. His body has become very thin due to this hunger strike. He is fasting on various issues e.g., US Capitalism, Indian and American State terrorism, nuclear weapons, etc. He has displayed his full biography near his fasting site. He eats a meal every 48 or 58 hours just to survive. He is about to complete his Ph.D. But he started using Dr. before the award of his degree. He has survived many decimations attempts by USA government agents. Ms. Roy has mentioned this incident in the following lines:

This is the second assassination attempt on me. Last year on 08th April, Honda city DL 8C X 4850, drove onto me. My right leg was fractured in three places. Even now it is hard for me to walk. I have to limp. People joke and say that I should marry Phoolbatti so that we have one healthy left leg and one healthy right leg for two of us. I laugh with them even though I don't find it funny. But it is important to laugh sometimes (P.131-132).

One can find the life of Dr. Azad Bhartiya very tragic and full of struggles because he has lost his health and his government job. His wife has left him and eloped with his brother and he is living under constant threat of assassination attempts by US agents. Further one sees hardly any hope for his victory against US capitalism and nuclear weapons. But still, he is successful in his struggle because he has provided a supporting platform for other protesters like Bhopal gas tragedy victims, Latur earthquake victims and Phoolbatti from Betul, etc. Other revolutionaries see a ray of hope in him as Comrade Maase Revathy (Mother of Miss Udaya Jebeen) has sent a letter to him to find her daughter and look after her. He has made a lot of good friends like Anjum, Tilottama, Saddam Hussein and Musa, etc due to his caring nature. He may not be fully successful in his struggle but he has succeeded in developing a ray of hope in other victims. So, Dr. Azad Bhartiya is also a great example of poetic justice in the novel.

Tilottama, Naga, Musa, and Biplab are the other main characters of the novel. Tilottama was born in Kerala to a Syrian Christian mother with a man of an untouchable caste. Since she was an illegitimate child, so her

mother left her in an orphanage. But later her mother adopted her from the orphanage. She studied Architecture at Delhi University in 1984. During her college time, she comes in contact with three men Musa, Naga, and Biplab Dasgupta. Naga and Biplab are doing their masters in History at Delhi University. Musa is her classmate at architecture school. All four are united for the Rehearsal of the play “Norman, Is that you”. Naga plays the role of Norman and Biplab plays the role of Garson Hobart in it. All three men love Tilottama. But she loves Musa. Since she does not marry to Musa. So, Musa goes back to Kashmir. Naga becomes a journalist and Biplab joins IB. Musa’s daughter and wife are killed accidentally by the security forces and he is called by Major Amrik Singh to the interrogation center. He sees the disappeared Kashmiri youths there tortured by Amrik Singh. It makes him furious and he joins the terrorists. Musa calls Tilottama to Kashmir. At Kashmir, she meets him and his friend Gulrej. Gulrej is killed by security forces and she is captured by security forces. But Biplab, who is posted in Kashmir as deputy director of IB, arranges to release her from their prison. Musa tells Tilottama to marry and live a safe life in Delhi. So, she marries Naga. But later she leaves him and starts living as a tenant at Biplab’s apartment. In the later part of the story, she moves to Jannat's guest house and lives with Anjum and her friends. She takes care of the lonely baby girl Miss Udaya Jebeen. Musa comes occasionally to meet her.

After discussing the story of all four friends one can find that Tilottama, who has spent a lonely childhood and part of her youth in a socially alienated atmosphere, has found the love and care of Anjum, Saddam and Musa but ultimately, she is living happily with them and

taking care of an orphan baby Miss Udaya Jebeen like her own daughter. Further, she teaches the children of poor neighbors sincerely at a very negligible cost. So, people are coming in large numbers to enroll their children in her coaching classes. Ms. Roy has described this beautifully in the following lines:

Word spread quickly in the poorer quarters that a clever woman had moved into the graveyard. Parents in the neighborhood flocked to enroll their children in the classes Tilo held at Jannat Guest House. Her pupils called her Tilo Madam and sometimes Ustaniji. She taught them arithmetic, drawing, computer graphics (on three second-hand desktop computers she had brought with minimal fees she charged) a bit of science, English and eccentricity (P 397).

One can say that Tilottama has found the love of a family in the form of Anjum, Saddam, Musa, and baby Miss Udaya Jebeen. She has struggled throughout her life and has faced many insults and tortures. But she gets a happier life in the end because of her good deeds. So, Tilottama is also an example of poetic justice.

Comrade Masse Revathy has a very small presence in the novel. Readers know about her through her letter to Dr. Azad Bhartiya. She is significant in the story as the mother of baby Miss Udaya Jebeen. She was sexually harassed under custody by policemen and Miss Udaya Jebeen was a result of this. She does not want that her daughter may face life like her so she leaves her at Jantar Mantar, a protesting site. The baby is found by Tilottama and later she is looked after well by Anjum and her friends at Jannat Guest House. Anjum and her friends treat the baby as her daughter.

They are scared to lose her when Dr. Azad Bhartiya talks about the real mother of Baby. So, one can find that the wishes of Masse Revathy, have been fulfilled as her daughter is in good hands and she has better fortune with them. This is also an indication of poetic justice.

Amrik Singh is a vicious character in the novel. He is posted as an army Major in Kashmir. He has decimated common civilians in place of terrorists. He has an illicit love affair with ACP Pinki of CRPF due to this he has frequent quarrels with his wife. He owned a sawmill and a furniture business in the valley under his wife's name. He despises journalists, lawyers, and human rights activists. He brutally murdered Jalib Quadari, the human rights activist. The author describes this incident in the following lines:

The people he didn't just disrespect but truly despised were human rights activists-mostly lawyers, journalists, and newspaper editors. To him, they were vermin who spoiled and distorted the rules of engagement of the great game with their constant complaining and whining. The case of Jalib Quadari was different. His orders had been merely to intimidate him. Things had gone wrong. Jalib quadari had made the mistake of being unafraid and talking back. (P.338)

After the decimation of Jalib Quadari, Amrik Singh quits the army and flees to Canada to save himself from the punishment of the government. He lives there under constant fear of his arrest by the Indian government. Musa and his fellow Kashmiri journalists start visiting him at his workplace and they use to remind him of his sins. Due to the constant mental torture of the guilt, he exterminates his family and takes his life

also. One can feel the demise of his family as they were not the partners in his sins. One can find that Amrik Singh is consumed by his guilt. So, his example also signifies that poetic justice is prevalent in this novel.

The novel has a happy ending as most of the characters are rewarded with a happier life after their struggle. Anjum has matured as a person and risen above her gender. She is thinking of the welfare of poorer people as she plans for a swimming pool for the locals. It shows her generousness. Zainab and Saddam are happily married. Tilottama is living happily with Anjum and Miss Udaya Jebeen. She has found the love and respect of local children, with whom she is teaching various subjects at a very nominal cost. Dr. Azad Bhartiya has become a very famous person and many victims are coming to get his support so that their voices may be heard by the government. Comrade Masse Revathy's final wish is fulfilled as her daughter is in safe hands with Anjum, Tilottama, and other caring members of Jannat Guest House. Malevolent Amrik Singh has exterminated his family members and ends his life also because of the fear and guilt. So, while summing up one can say that most of the virtuous characters have come above their sufferings and struggles to lead a happier life. The vicious characters suffer seclusion, guilt or mental pains. So, this novel has shown ample examples to prove the supremacy of poetic justice.

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