

# The Interplay of Discrimination and Identity Imbroglia in Arundhati Roy's the Ministry of Utmost Happiness

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**Abstract –** *This research paper is a sincere attempt to gauge the discrimination prevalent in Indian society as described in Arundhati Roy's novel The Ministry of Utmost Happiness which was published in 2017. Having different historical contexts, this novel is a reflection to various types of discriminations prevalent in the Indian society such as transgender discrimination that is based on gender identity, women discrimination that is based on male domination, dalit discrimination based on caste system, Muslim minority discrimination based on religious prejudice and national identity crisis based on multi-ethnic alienation that leads to the issue of identity crisis in the dislocated and disoriented people. The author has used a glut of historical event to represent the theme of identity crisis. The victims of discrimination suffer from personality disorder and feel alienated because they are incapable of synchronizing with the biased society.*

**Keywords:** *Discrimination, Transgender, Identity Crisis, Dalit, Dislocated, Disoriented, Multi-Ethnic.*

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I  
“I am talking about millions of men in whom fear has been cunningly instilled, who have been taught to have an inferiority complex, to tremble, kneel, despair, and behave like flunkies.” (Ce'saire 7)

Since time immemorial, our society has been cleaved into the powerless and the powerful in which the powerless people are bulldozed by the domination and servility of the powerful class of the society and they become the victims of paranoia. They have no identity and existence in the society. They suffer from the lack of identity or they live with a mutilated identity. They are the wretched creatures on earth having no past and they are the victims of inferiority complex and are always afraid of being humiliated. This research paper is aimed at studying various forms of discrimination practiced in Indian society those further lead to Identity crisis which is “the common dynamic pattern of a group of severe disturbances.... revealed itself later to be a pathological aggravation, an undue prolongation of, or a regression to, a normative crisis ‘belonging’ to a particular stage of individual development. (Erikson19)

This research paper discusses trans-gender discrimination and identity crisis the roots of which lie in the issue of gender identity. Gender identity is the identity of a person caused by the degree of feminine or masculine traits in a person conforming to the

stereotypical definition of a male or female expounded by the society. The gender identity of a person is a psychological aspect of a person reflecting his/her sexual orientations. In the article, *Let Us to Live: Social Exclusion of Hijra Community*, Sibsankar Mal (2015) has defined the word Hijra or trans-gender “as an umbrella term to signify individuals who defy rigid, binary gender constructions and who express or present a breaking and blurring of culturally prevalent stereotypically gender roles.” (109)

The hijras don't harmonize with the stereotypes of the society. Hence, they are deprived of their rights in the society as they don't fit in this gendered society. They live with female emotions imprisoned in a male body. They always face a dilemma of identity crisis in this clichéd society based on binary relationship of male and female genders. They find no place for themselves and are discarded by their families too. They are devoid of social, economic and political equality in the society. Living in the stigma, they always pine for their identity and a niche for themselves in this gendered society.

This research paper also deals with female discrimination in Indian society. Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak (1995) has rightly said, “If in the context of colonial production, subaltern has n history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow....” (28)

Indian society is a male dominating society where females are the subordinates facing hardships given by male monopoly. They are the victims of gender discrimination. The plexus of patriarchal society is composed of the stereotypes that favour the supremacy of male over female. Women are the wretched dolls moving in alienation having no identity of their own. Living in the ghetto of male enslavement, they bear the trepidation endorsed by male supremacy. They are harassed and raped brutally. They are devoid of equal rights and opportunities and are the gudgeons having no identity of their own. Time and again, women make an effort to vocalize their pain but they are quieted. This gender discrimination not only suppresses them on social platform but also deprives them of their right to education, right to attain financial independence and equal political contribution. They are segregated from the social and national mainstream and their contribution is never rewarded. They live with the feeling of inferiority complex and endure the agony of discrimination and identity crisis.

The present research paper also muses on dalit discrimination and identity crisis. According to International Dalit Society Network, "The word 'Dalit' meaning 'broken' or 'ground down', is used by 'outcaste' people themselves to describe at the same time their oppression, their identity and their collective power for emancipation." (IDSN 3)

Dalits are a section of Indian society that is looked down upon and mistreated by people belonging to other castes who consider themselves above them (dalits). Dalits are also called untouchables. Indian constitution terms them as 'Schedule Castes.' People belonging to schedule castes are deprived of social, political and economic equality. They are not allowed to sit together and share food with people belonging to high castes. They are not allowed to marry the boy or girl belonging to the so-called high castes. They are forced to perform duties like human scavenging that are considered very low and degraded in our society. Dalits become the victims of subjection and violence at the hands of the high class society. They give up and succumb to the atrocities of majority group. They are beaten, lynched and killed brutally. The untouchables are not allowed to enter spiritual places or Hindu temples. At workplace, they are not paid equally. They are denied basic amenities of life. They bear the brunt of servility and discrimination in the society that is governed by high class majority. They have no existence in the rigid Indian social system and become the victims of Identity crisis.

Muslim minority group discrimination and identity crisis is also at the heart of this research paper. This religious minority group is victimized and humiliated by the majority groups. Though the constitution provides the right to equality, right to life and liberty, freedom of expression, dignity of life and labour to all its citizens yet the muslims, being a religious minority, face vilification and calumny. They are forced to live in a

suffocating environment. They fall a prey to communal violence that is sponsored and sheltered by ruling majority group for social and political gains. Minority Rights Group International (2017) has rightly said:

"Communal violence further intensifies the marginalization of those affected, who frequently face high levels of insecurity alongside inadequate access to justice and reparations, often with particularly challenging implications for women. Religious minorities have long been the target of a range of different forms of persecution, such as hate crimes, threats, attacks on places of worship, and forced conversion." (MRGI 3)

A democracy should always adopt the principle of 'Majority Rule and Minority Rights' but the pity of the modern scenario is that Muslims being the minorities are targeted and suppressed. They don't feel secure in our society. They feel like minions having no existence in the country they are called citizens of.

The issue of national identity crisis has also been reflected upon in this research paper. Ernest Renan (1992) says:

"A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things which, properly speaking, are really one and the same constitute this soul, this spiritual principle. One is the past, the other is the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present consent, the desire to live together, the desire to continue to invest in the heritage that we have jointly received.... The nation, like the individual, is the outcome of a long past of efforts, sacrifices and devotions. (10)

Indian people in some parts of the country are facing the problem of national identity crisis. Though people have the citizenship and the constitution provides them equal rights and freedom still people feel as if they are living on an alien land. They have not been able to synchronize with the multi-ethnic society. Hence, they demand freedom and separation from their own land. They are in a conundrum as they don't feel like belonging to India. This identity rage results in rebellion and defiance.

## II

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is a beautiful narrative set in Delhi. It portrays some violent and significant incidents of Indian history. There are a variety of characters in the plot of the novel which presents various violent incidents like Kashmir Unrest, Godhra train attack, Ahmedabad riots, transgender dilemma and predicament of a female in the male dominating society that is divided on the basis of caste. Aftab is reborn as Anjum and starts living the life chosen by herself in the Khwabgah. She sets her emotional instincts free

and remains in the Khwabgah for thirty years. One day, she finds a baby girl who is abandoned or lost. Anjum takes her to Khwabgah and names her Zeenab. After sometime, she encounters a massacre in Gujrat that is the outcome of Godhra train attack. She gets a traumatic shock from this incident and decides to leave Khwabgah. She takes refuge in a local cemetery and transforms it into a guest house and names it 'Jannat Guest House'. She also starts funeral services for poor, isolated and subjugated people of the society.

Then the story of the novel shifts towards a baby found at an observatory in Delhi. Anjum takes the child. She receives a letter from the mother of the child who has written that she is unable to look after the child, so she is leaving the child there. After some time, the baby disappears. Anjum searches for the baby everywhere and then finds the baby at the home of a lady named S. Tilotamma. She was strong, short, smart, dark-skinned and self-dependent woman. She was a student of Architecture in the university in Delhi. During her college days, two men loved her very much. One was Naga who later on became a mainstream journalist and the other was Biplab Dasgupta, popularly called 'Garson Hobart', who later on became a bureaucrat. There was one more boy, Musa Yeswi, a boy from Kashmir. Tilo was very close to Musa.

After University, Musa goes back to Kashmir and gets married. Tilo and Musa reconnect with each other after some time. Tilo comes to learn that Musa's wife Arifa and daughter Jebeen have been killed by Police at Jammu and Kashmir and he has joined Kashmir separatist movement, a movement demanding independence of Kashmir and separation of Kashmir from India. Later on, Tilo marries Naga to play safe but fourteen years later they divorce. Tilo then rents an apartment from Garson Hobart. After sometime, Tilo takes the baby from the observatory in Delhi and names that baby Miss Jebeen the Second after the name of Musa's daughter who was killed by Police in Kashmir. The story of the novel depicts the Kashmir unrest and dilemma of Kashmiri people. Later on, Tilo moves to Jannat guest house along with the baby Jebeen the Second. One day they receive a letter from Jebeen the Second's real mother, Comarade Masse Revathy. In the letter, she reveals that she was raped and so she could not bring up the child. She named the child Udaya. Hence, Anjum and others name the child Udaya Jebeen. At the end of the novel, Musa who has become a member of Kashmir Liberation movement, meets Garson Hobart and talks to him about the unrest prevailing in Kashmir. He says that this unrest will cause chaos and destruction in the whole country. He also meets Tilo at Jannat guest house but leaves to get back to his mission of Kashmir Liberation and gets killed later on. In the last scene, Anjum and Miss Udaya Jebeen go for a walk in Delhi. Anjum satisfies her motherly instincts by looking after her and that little innocent soul is getting an exposure to the outside world.

### III

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is a remarkable narrative depicting various types of discriminations prevailing at different levels and the predicament of people suffering from Identity crisis. Arundhati Roy has reflected upon transgender discrimination and identity crisis with the help of her protagonist, Anjum who is a transgender. In a society of binary sex relations, a transgender finds no place for herself. Anjum was born as Aftab in a muslim family of Delhi. Her family raised her as a boy but when her father learns that she is a transgender (Hijra), he breaks all relationships from her (Anjum). Her mother, ofcourse, loves her a lot but she is in a dilemma. It is apparent that in a gendered society, where each and every word and object have been categorized as male or female, her child has no gender based identity. She thinks:

"In Urdu, the only language she knew, all things, not just living things but all things- carpets, clothes, books, pens, musical instruments- had a gender. Everything was either masculine or feminine, man or woman. Everything except her baby. Yes ofcourse she knew there was a word for those like him- Hijra. Two words actually, Hijra and Kinnar. But two words do not make a language. (Roy 8)

When Aftab is reborn as Anjum, she leaves her family to live a life of her choice. She enters Khwabgah, a place where eight Hijras live together. This Khwabgah is the house of dreams of all these transgenders- Bulbul, Razia, Heera, Baby, Nimmo Gorakhpuri, Mary, Gudiya and their Ustad Kulsoom Bi. Now Anjum has also joined them. But one day Nimmo and Anjum have a discussion on the difference between the lives of normal people who are either men or women and the lives of transgenders who are none. Nimmo says:

"No one is happy here. It's not possible. Arre yaar, think about it, what are the things you normal people get unhappy about? .... Price-rise, children's school-admissions, husband's beatings, wives' cheatings, Hindu-Muslim riots, Indo-Pak War.... But for us the price rise and school admissions and beating husbands and cheating wives are all inside us. The riot is inside us. The war is inside us. Indo-Pak is inside us. It will never settle down. It can't." (Roy 23)

These words clearly portray her frustration of not being a normal one. Being a Hijra means a non-entity.

One day, Kulsoom Bi, the Ustad of all the Hijras, recollects her life spent under the patronage of Mughal Empire. She expresses the significance of having an identity in society saying:

"To be present in history, even as nothing more than a chuckle, was a universe away from being absent from it, from being written out of it altogether. A chuckle,

after all, could become a foothold in the sheer wall of the future." (Roy 51)

Thus, Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is a masterpiece illustrating the pain and torment of the life of a transgender.

Women discrimination and identity crisis has also been represented in this novel. Arundhati Roy's character S. Tilottama, who is a short, dark-skinned woman, represents the issue of women discrimination and identity crisis. She is a woman who "didn't seem to have a past, a family, a community, a people or even a home." (Roy 155). Her mother was a high caste South Indian woman. She had a love affair with an untouchable (Periyah) and then Tilo was born. Her mother first abandoned her. She spent her childhood in a Christian child home. After some time, her mother returned and adopted her. According to other people, Tilo is a mystery. Nobody knows about her family or past. She fights with the whole society alone. During college days, two men loved her. One was Biplab and other was Naga. Both did not know about her family. Biplab says:

"Tilo was like a paper boat on a boisterous sea. She was absolutely alone. Even the poor in our country, brutalized as they were, had families. How would she survive? How long would it be before her boat went down? (Roy 160)

Arundhati Roy has also presented the plight of a character Comrade Masse Revathy. She was a member of the communist party. She was once raped brutally by her party members. She gave birth to a baby girl but she had to abandon the child at an observatory in Delhi.

These incidents clearly explain the status of women in Indian society. They are not safe and secure. They don't enjoy equal rights and position in the society. They are tortured, harassed and humiliated. They live with a broken and mutilated identity. They exist nowhere in this male-dominating society. They are treated as slaves to gratify the desires of men in Indian society which is a society of monopoly of men. They are the fallen angels bearing the yoke of male domination and psychophancy.

*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* also explores the dalit discrimination and identity crisis. Roy's character Saddam Hussain is an untouchable. He has worked in a mortuary. He tells about the discrimination and prejudiced behaviour of Hindu doctors towards the untouchables at the hospital. He says,

"The Hindu doctors who were required to conduct post mortems thought of themselves as upper caste and would not touch dead bodies of untouchables for fear of being polluted. The men who actually handled the cadavers and performed the post mortems were employed as cleaners and belonged to a cast of

sleepers and leather workers who used to be called Chamars. The doctors like most Hindus looked down on them and considered them to be Untouchable." (Roy 72-73)

The untouchables are mistreated in India. They are broken people. They are consigned to lowest jobs. The dalit women are raped, murdered and forced to become prostitutes. They are the meek, poor creatures stigmatized by upper caste regime facing distress and disorientation in search of their place in the society.

India is a huge democratic country where many minorities live. Muslims are a minority group having different customs, rituals, festivals and culture. Muslim minorities are discriminated by Hindu majority in India. The Ministry of Utmost Happiness is a replica of the twinge and spasm of Muslims. Arundhati Roy's character Saddam Hussain explains how it is dangerous to be a Muslim in India. Saddam used to work as a security guard for a Delhi based company. But he had to work there with Hindu identity.

"Saddam told Sangeeta madam that his name was Daya Chand (because every idiot knew that in the prevailing climate a security guard with a Muslim name would have been considered a contradiction in terms)." (Roy 75)

He recalls an incident when he and his father went to pick up the dead body of a cow at a village. His father was beaten to death because of the doubt of allegedly killing a cow by a mob of some Hindu extremists only because they are Muslims. He unfolds his pain while talking to Anjum about his past and says:

"I have never heard a sound like that.... it was a strange high sound, it wasn't human.... Everybody watched. Nobody stopped them.... How they splashed through puddles of his father's blood as it were rainwater.... I was part of the mob that killed my father." (Roy 89)

Roy has narrated Gujrat riots in her novel to demonstrate the plight of Muslims victimized by communal violence after Godhra train attack in which many Hindus were burnt alive. Gujrat riots were an outcome of Godhra violence. Roy says:

"The Urdu papers carried stories of young Muslim boys being killed in what the Police called 'encounters', or being caught red-handed in the act of planning terrorist strikes and arrested. A new law was passed which allowed suspects to be detained without trials for months. In no time at all the prisons were full of young Muslim men." (Roy 42)

*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* also reveals the national identity crisis of India through Kashmir

Unrest which is the grave concern of the modern society. Roy describes the Kashmir Liberation Movement when the Police brutally kill his wife and daughter on the basis of doubt only just because of being Muslims. Musa is the replica of many other Muslims of Kashmir who think that they don't belong to India. They are not willing to accept themselves as Indian because they are the victims of prejudice, isolation, dislocation, violence and ascendancy of the government imposed on them. They raise their voice for freedom and shout slogans of 'azaadi'. Roy says:

"Their problem is not confusion, not really. It's more like a terrible clarity that exists outside the language of modern geopolitics. All the protagonists on all sides of the conflict, especially us, exploited this fault line mercilessly. It made for a perfect war- a war that can never be won or lost, a war without end." (Roy 181)

#### IV

Hence, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is a brimful of a plethora of narratives that manifest the layers of discrimination embedded in Indian society in various forms at various levels. This discrimination generates the issue of identity crisis amongst the victims and the discrimination. Many laws are formulated to curb discrimination based on caste, colour, sex and religion. But those laws are not executed properly. Heinous and shameful crimes are committed due to the feeling of prejudice and discrimination that further prompt the question of identity crisis of the forgotten ones.

"You will never stop falling. And as you fall you will hold on to other falling people. The sooner you understand that the better. This place where we live, where we have made our home, is the place of falling people. Here there is no haqeeqat.... We aren't real. We don't really exist. (Roy 84)

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