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## The Organization of Power in Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*: A Foucauldian Reading

Raheela Hameed Laghari \*

Muhammad Asif Khan †

Aamer Shaheen ‡

### Abstract

*The present study aims to highlight the role of power in Arundhati Roy's The Ministry of Utmost Happiness through the ideas given by Michel Foucault. Roy discusses various power centers present in contemporary Indian society, which institutionalize the suppression faced by various characters in the novel on the basis of their caste, religion, social class, or political affiliations. The study intends to expose the dissection of these power centers active in society as the non-linear trajectory of power. The characters of Anjum, Tilo, Musa, and Revathy face suppression to the point of marginalization. This leads them to subvert the power structures of the society by resisting against them, thus negating the linear hierarchy of power.*

**Key Words:** Foucault, Hierarchy, Power, Resistance, Suppression

### Introduction

Arundhati Roy is a well-known political activist in addition to being a writer. Both her fiction and nonfiction writings focus upon the injustice prevalent in the society, Indian in particular. She focuses upon the marginalization faced by the lower classes due to a strict class system present in the social structure. She also discusses the problems related to capitalism, political totalitarianism and ecofeminism. After her famous Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The God of Small Things*, it took her twenty years to write fiction again. The issues she deals with in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* are wide-ranging and related to contemporary Indian society. There is a crowd of characters in this novel, representing the suppression faced by them based on their caste, gender or religion. Anjum, the 'hijra', is a representation of the alienation felt by transgender people in traditional Indian society. The rejection she

faced by her family made her move out of the ordinary world into the "khawabgaah" (45) and later, into the graveyard, as her abode in the form of a guest house. The guest house brings Dayachand, the Dalit who hides his identity and becomes Saddam Hussein in order to gain a low-level job. Being a lower caste Hindu, he was a helpless watcher as the crowd of people publically lynched his father on doubts of killing a cow. S. Tilotama is a character modelled after Roy herself. The Syrian Cristian student of architecture finds herself in Kashmir with Musa Yeswi, who took up arms because he was not allowed to have a simple family life by the military. These characters all combine at the Jannat Guest House in the graveyard, combining the loose threads of many chaotic experiences. All of these characters face exploitation by power. The institutionalized suppression they face is due to their caste, color,

\*Research Scholar, Department of English Literature, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur, Punjab, Pakistan.

† Assistant Professor, Department of English Literature, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur, Punjab, Pakistan.

Email: [drasifkhan39@gmail.com](mailto:drasifkhan39@gmail.com)

‡ Assistant Professor, Department of English Literature, GC University, Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan.

gender, religion or socio-culture placement; it leads them to the point of marginalization. Ultimately, this suppression leads to the subversion of power, negating the linear power hierarchy.

### Literature Review

Arundhati Roy is not only a writer but also a famous political activist. Her first Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The God of Small Things*, talks about various issues of society. She openly criticizes the injustice faced by the marginalized people in the society due to a strict classification according to the caste system prevalent in India. Her nonfiction writings also shed light on suppressed people living at the margins of the social structures. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* also depicts the chaos spread all around in the present times. Countries like India with a post-colonial heritage have a lot of internalized struggles after their independence. Those struggles could range from religion, race and gender to political unrest. [John Maerhofer \(2015\)](#) writes that Roy fights against imperialist war, capitalism, nationalism and military occupation of the subcontinental politics. India remains a hypocritical state in the name of being a democracy while being a non-tolerant and violence-ridden country. Kashmir remained an unsolvable dispute of the post-colonial independence and, therefore, a heavily militarized zone and occupied land. The novel talks about cruelties going on in Kashmir by the Indian army in detail. The novel is also not negligent toward the Maoist freedom movement and the marginalization of the Dalit community.

[Jobin M. Kanjirakkat \(2017\)](#) also visualizes the large canvas being dealt with in this novel. The issues Roy talks about in this book are wide-ranging in an experimental style of a scattered narration. A motley of a diverse range of characters shows the struggles faced by a particular religion, gender or caste. [Wahaj Mohsin and Shaista Taskeen \(2017\)](#) explore the epic scale of the novel as well. According to them, Roy has tried to overcome the difference between the center and the periphery. Just like the old Japanese art of joining broken pieces with gold dust, Roy has tried to use her pen to join the broken pieces of society. [Manoj S. \(2017\)](#) is of the view that *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is a book with a vast canvas. It explores all the cultural, political and economic

aspects of contemporary India. This book historicizes fiction in just the way Stephen Greenblatt insisted. Professor Greenblatt gave utmost importance to the literary texts of a particular time in history in addition to historical texts in order to gain the right understanding of that period. Traditionally, India had been historicized through the fiction written by writers such as Rudyard Kipling or E. M. Forster. Arundhati Roy's book serves this purpose successfully. [Jagdish Batra \(2017\)](#) argues that this book has a political core with its main focus on the Kashmir conflict. [Pramod K. Nayyar \(2017\)](#) terms Roy's writing style moving from cosmopolitan to vernacular domain in her writings as "genetic engineering" (Joseph Slaughter, 2007) because she adapts and hybridizes different genres for her political purpose. She talks about the massacre of Rwanda in 1999 and Armenia in 1915 in her nonfiction essay 'Listening to the Grasshoppers' (2008). She compares these incidents to the massacre of Muslims in Gujrat, India. She aligns the incidents of contemporary Indian society in her fiction and nonfiction works to the international ones. The result is the creation of mobility.

[Swati Ganguli \(2017\)](#) captures Roy's critique of the corporate sector. State nexus and corporate sector depend for their sustenance on exploiting not only human beings but also the natural resources. If people offer any resistance, they are crushed mercilessly. But, Roy gave a voice to their fight through her book. [Shafi Khan \(2017\)](#) argues that *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is an amalgam of fiction and nonfiction. Many incidents and names are based on real events and people. The allusions include the characters of Major Amrik Singh, Aggarwal and Jalib Qadri. The real persons are a notoriously cruel Major Avtar Singh, the political leader Arvind Kejriwal and the lawyer Adv. Jalil Qadri. The novel alludes to the realities just like Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*. [Critic Nalini Iyer \(2018\)](#) looks upon *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* through a post-colonial lense. Many post-colonial writers such as Chinua Achebe, Vassanji, and Ngugi have struggled with the question of a post-colonial state failing to deliver the promises of democracy. Roy deals with the same problem in this novel. Through a political viewpoint, Roy discusses the

plight of the marginalized classes without romanticizing their trauma.

[Julia Vallasek \(2018\)](#) discusses this novel as a representation of contemporary India. Full to brim with traumatic experiences, this novel shows the stories of many subcultures. The stories of all characters become intermingled with the political core. Roy has given voice to the subaltern through this book and has emphasized the religious, ethnic and sexual identities. The small communities work together to raise their joined voice against the narrative of oppression of the contemporary world. In doing so, this novel reaffirms the idea of Foucault, "Knowledge is not innocent; it is always operated by power; thus a textual universe constitutes a discourse on the *other* using interpretations from a different, supposed to be a superior point of view." (172). [Angelo Monaco \(2018\)](#) asserts that *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* discusses the contrast of post-colonial India and its realities. This novel is a representation of historical realism, which is juxtaposed with the fantasy of the real India.

[Prashant Muraya \(2019\)](#) and Nagendra Kumar discuss the novel's political allusions and overtones. The Modi government and its backing the terrorist organization of RSS, which drives towards the saffronization of the whole country, is that Roy fights against in this novel. She uses the incidents of the state emergency of 1975, the Bhopal gas leak of 1984, September 11 attacks in the USA, Gujarat riots of 2002, and the election of Modi in 2004 as a prime minister and the anti-corruption movement of 2011 to criticize the political climate of India. [Rizwan Mustafa and Zoya Jamil Chaudhry \(2019\)](#) explored the novel through the idea of "the self" and "the other" by Edward Said ([Said, 1978](#)). Roy talks about the lower classes of contemporary society by focusing on casteism, women subjugation and the rise of extremism in Indian society. [Lisa Lau \(2019\)](#) and Ana Cristina Mendes state that *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* remakes the otherized and misfits of the society present in it. This romance is not only a rebuttal to all the wrong happenings of society but can also be thought of as a political rescue.

## Research Design

The idea of New Criticism of looking at texts

excluding the external features such as history, biographical factors and social elements paved the way for New Historicism. This theory advocated the inclusion of all these external factors in order to comprehend a text. Professor Greenblatt's term, "cultural poetics" (2012), suggested considering the text and context of the critic and the author both while evaluation any work. Any piece of literature can be understood by taking resource to cultural and social forces both. Works of literature are not produced by a single consciousness; rather, they have a solid historical basis. People of all historical ages remain deeply rooted in the social and political scenarios of their particular age. Human beings and, therefore, literature both are shaped by social factors and political happenings. ([Greenblatt, 2005](#)). New Historicism contradicts the idea of literature as a human activity. For these theorists, literature is another version of history. [Critic Hans Bertens \(158\)](#) declares this theory as focusing upon the various discourses which were suppressed through power. It throws light on the side of history marginalized by the rival side. [Jonathan Culler \(114\)](#) says that the connection between discourses, power and texts is traced through this theory.

Many of the concepts of New Historicism are based on the ideas of the French philosopher and literary critic Michel Foucault. He used his intellectual ideas to contribute towards fighting against various oppressions and tyrannies. He was considered a hero of prison reforms, the anti-psychiatry movement and gay liberation ([Gary Gutting, 2005](#)). One of the most famous of Foucault's concepts is that of power. Foucault sees the institutions of the powerful regulating knowledge and also its discursive manifestations. In his book *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault says that "power produces knowledge" (10). From this statement, it is to be gathered that both power and knowledge imply each other. The power relations have laws that are correlative with knowledge. Knowledge, meanwhile, makes it necessary that the power relations are implemented. The institutions of power in a social setting regulate and maintain knowledge by putting forth a set of rules for everyone to follow. Society functions in a categorized setting, e.g., hospitals, schools and universities, mental

institutions, prisons, police, military, bureaucratic agencies and many more.

Power is defined by Foucault in more than one novel way. He negates the age-old perception of power as the use of brute force by the powerful over the powerless. In his book *Power/Knowledge* (1980), he discusses that power operates within everyday relations and institutions and people. In his book, he utilized the example of medieval times when power was about absolute control over people. Convicts were publically penalized, and by this show of brute force and violence, more often than not, the public sentiment went in favor of the convict. The convicts were seen as having heroic qualities. This increased the danger of public revolt, effectively undermining the power of the authorities of that time. Hence, Foucault declares, "power must be analyzed as something which circulates, or as something which only functions in the form of a chain ... power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization ... individuals are the vehicles of power, not its point of application" (98).

There are a few inferences to be taken from this statement of Foucault. Firstly, power is not to be taken as ruthless oppression by an oppressor of the oppressed. Power is not to be taken as having the possession of something or someone. Power is to be seen as a whole system of relations that is spread throughout a societal setting. Secondly, individuals are not to be seen as the recipients of power. They are also the point from which resistance takes place. As power is everywhere, it comes from everywhere. The relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed cannot be in a singular binary form. Contrary to what is considered a general rule, power does not come from top to bottom only. It comes from all directions. It is present in all the various manifestations of society like families, various institutions, small groups etc. Foucault discusses power as the ability to influence someone's actions. It can be taken as the means to control how people think, act, feel and behave. Also, everyone present within a society is a vehicle of power. Everyone has some kind of influence and exercises some power on others. The point to be noted is that everyone, though exerting some kind of power, the power is not of the same scale or magnitude. For Foucault, power is a strategy. The manner of someone's reactions and

performance in a particular context is what defines this strategy. Therefore, the concept of Foucauldian power is that it is not a thing to be possessed or achieved. It needs to be performed constantly, making it non-linear. In his book *The Archeology of Knowledge*, Foucault analyzed the situation of society. He said that some sections of society are excluded from the social order deliberately. He refers to this as the "negative structure" (83). This structure has its emphasis on the binary placements of certain groups of people. The binary positioning of two groups in a society results poorly as coexistence in such a case results in resistance. In his book *The History of Sexuality* (1976), Foucault says, "...where there is power, there is resistance" (95).

The method utilized for this research is qualitative. It is based on an analysis of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. This paper focuses on the idea of power as seen by Michel Foucault and applies it to Arundhati Roy's work. The present study is an effort to show that Arundhati Roy in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* has discussed power centers present in contemporary Indian society. From the fast-rising totalitarian government of the primarily Hindu state, she scrutinizes the military, media and educational institutions as well. The power hierarchy of these institutions leads to the marginalization of certain particular segments of the society, such as minority religious and political groups. Power is exercised through various points—the instability of power results due to the resistance born out of power itself. Resistance is also witnessed at every level in the society rendering power unstable. Roy is focused on detailing the critique of the power centers working on exercising power in society. Be it media or the press, religion or politics; her sharp pen does not spare any aspect. Through different characters in her book, she displays the resistance, which these power points encountered. The Muslim 'Hijra', a Syrian Cristian woman, a Kashmiri militant, a Dalit, and a freedom fighter, all unified by the end of the book in the graveyard, resisting in their own separate ways. The Roy novel shows the resistance that meets the dominant, and this is conforming with the ideas of Foucault, where he discusses the non-linear movement of power, making it unstable and ultimately leading to subversion.

## Discussion and Analysis

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is a novel with a vast canvass. She has emphasized the marginalized sections present in society. The hierarchy of people who are present at the periphery, outside the established order of the society, is criticized in this novel. She talks about Indian society in particular. The readers see an in-depth analysis of the various power centers present in Indian society as portrayed by the author. The marginalized classes are oppressed by the power over them through community, religion and state oppression. Various power centers portrayed in the novel are easily spotted as splattered across the novel. They are the religious and political parties, the police and military, media and institutions like schools and universities.

### Politics and Religion Used as Power Centers

Political discourse in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* can be seen deeply entwined with the nationalistic agenda. Kashmir conflict is in the center of the novel, discussing the attitude of the political power center in dealing with it. Instead of working for a solution for one of the biggest crises on humanitarian grounds, the politicians used and keep using Kashmir as repetitive rhetoric to keep them in power by gaining more votes. An example of the political slogan is given by the author, "doodh mango gey to kheer dengey! Kashmir mango gey to cheer dengey! Ask for milk, we'll give you cream! Ask for Kashmir, we'll rip you open seam to seam!" (103). India's national and political agenda has developed its roots in the religious discourse. Despite maintaining a façade of democracy, the country is ruled by the people of RSS, which is a Hindu party essentially and believes in the superiority of only the Hindu people. The ruling party of India is the BJP, which is a branch of the extremist Hindu religious party of Hindutva. Religion, in the hands of these people, is used as a tool to keep their power positions maintained and keep the people of the other religions like Muslims, Sikhs, Parsis and lower-caste Hindus as well, at the periphery. Roy shows the plight of people who are slaughtered, raped and penalized because of their religion, caste or political differences. The readers see Anjum; the Hijra stuck in the massacre of Gujrat, Dayachand, the Dalit changing his identity to secure a lowest paying job, Tilo, the Syrian Christian

woman travelling to Kashmir for Musa, the Muslim bound to be persecuted. All these threads tell stories of plight under the fast-rising totalitarian system of India.

### Press and Media as a Power Center

The press and media are shown by Roy as another power center controlling the thinking of the masses as it has a very crucial role in shaping and making the opinions of the people. Media and press is a very powerful weapon in the hand of the power elite, and therefore it chooses selected issues for coverage. The novel has a sizable section dealing with the mass protest at Janter Manter. It's an allusion to the Anna Hazare protest in 2009. People belonging to different walks of life came together to protest for their rights. There were farmers, students, artists, actors and musicians. But the cameras pointed away from the mothers of Kashmir who came to protest about mass killings and abductions. They also didn't cover the people surviving from the Bhopal gas leak incident, asking for basic rights such as clean air and clean drinking water. Seven people on hunger strike were also ignored by the media. The Ghanaian activist sitting in protest for indigenous and poor farmers suffering at the hands of coal mining companies was also denied coverage. However, she was presented as a villain funded by foreign powers by the anchorpersons sitting on the T.V channels owned by those thermal power plants and coal mining companies. The protest of Anna Hazare was hijacked by various political parties, and all the media started propagating the ideals of those political parties, becoming an effective tool of power. It wasn't interesting in reality and the problems of the people. It propagated the idea of progressive capitalist India and happy industrial India. Roy aptly puts it, "As always, everybody believed what they wanted to believe" (61).

### The Military as a Power Center

Trained to shoot and kill, the soldiers in the military often are seen opening fire on their own citizens in the novel. Be it the Kashmiris or the MAOIST freedom fighters. The military, as an institution, also is seen as a tool of power to control the masses. In Roy's novel, Major Amrik Singh and ACP Pinky are the notoriously famous characters who instil fear in

the heart of Kashmiris through torture and thus, keeping them from revolt. This major calls himself the 'azaadi express', mocking the hopes and believes of the afterlife of Kashmiris by killing them in order to send them to heaven. Kashmir is a heavily militarized zone, and each and every Kashmiri lived under the very strict scrutiny of the Indian army. The army helped to convert the valley of Kashmir into a panopticon for the people in power. The people of the valley are seen as living under a constant spotlight and are constantly at the receiving end of the exercise of power.

### **The Education System as a Tool of Power**

The institutions such as colleges and schools are also utilized as tools of power. As mere toys in the hands of the power elite, they are used to spread some specific ideas instead of imparting education facilities in society. Roy believes that these institutions propagate a certain set of biased opinions, and her character Tilo's book is evidence of that. It's a mock comprehension book for very young children. It has reading passages and questions to answer at the end of each passage. These kinds of books are commonly used by schools and colleges for teaching life lessons to students. But Tilo's book is a collection of some heart-wrenching stories about the atrocities of the army performed on civilians. The questions designed at the end are asking about the person to blame or celebrate for the injustice and bloodshed. Those questions are seemingly unanswerable. Her book also includes a new "Kashmiri English Alphabet". The way the alphabet is taught at the beginning of childhood, the people of Kashmir know about their designated position of the binary.

### **Resistance**

Resistance arises from the negative structure of society. When the certain section is placed at the opposite end of the power structures, they are considered marginalized. This very position of marginalization gives birth to resistance. So the resistance can be viewed as part and parcel of power itself. [Critic Harcourt \(2012\)](#) defines resistance as a refusal to "willingly accept the sanctions meted out by the legal and political system. It challenges the conventional way that political governance takes place, that laws are enforced. It turns back on the

political institutions and actors who govern us all". (34)

Various characters in the novel are representatives of resistance. It can be seen that the character of Biplabdas Gupta is essential in dealing with the question of resistance. As he does not really belong to the marginalized class, he was still won over by Tilo's documents. He was a firm believer of the state's supremacy and talked openly about strict dealings with people opposing the military rule in Kashmir. MusaYeswi is a representation of the resistance of the youth of Kashmir. He had aspirations to become an architect and studied at a prominent institute in India before returning to his hometown. He joined the freedom fighters after his wife and daughter were shot by the army while watching a funeral procession sitting at their own balcony. Musa's plight is no different from thousands of young men who are forced to take up arms because they have simply are not given the option to pursue a normal family life while living in Kashmir. Roy details an episode of a young prisoner Kashmiri boy while Tilo is detained for interrogation. She describes the helpless creature as an additional snack with tea to be devoured and enjoyed. Being severely injured, the young boy couldn't walk or even move. But he remained silent and didn't cry out for the delight of people ogling at him, knowing full well that this act of his went unnoticed. His gritted teeth and defiance were a "majestic" (223) act of resistance in the face of power. A small kitten is also seen as an example of valour when she is taken out of the pocket of a mentally challenged boy Gulrez and thrown into a river. It took her a nanosecond to sink, but she bared her fangs and yowled, "ready to take on the entire Indian Army all by herself" (377). The brute force utilized by the government to tackle the Kashmir issue turned against them and was stoned by all the Kashmiri people in unison. A retired bureaucrat advised Biplabdas Gupta, "take'em by the balls, hearts and minds will follow" (247). The hearts and minds of the people of Kashmir didn't follow at all. They resisted further away, so much that the only connection between India and Kashmir is described by Roy as the tunnel through the mountains which joins these lands.

Anjum's character also portrays resistance in the novel. She was born as Aftab in an old Delhi



'muhalla'. Unable to suppress the female tendencies, Aftab moved to the residence of the transgender, the 'khawabgah' and lived her life as Anjum. She gained the freedom to live her life as she wanted to wear colourful 'dupattas and fancy sequenced dresses. But her thirst for being a mother made her yearn for another life that differs from being sexualized eye candy for the world. She fought against the role thrust upon the transgender by society. She wanted to exist as a regular person without the expectations of being a man, a woman or a seductive way of entertainment. Therefore, "She lived in the graveyard like a tree" (1). She endured all the rains and hailstorms as a free person.

Tilo's character is the personification of resistance in the novel. She was born from an illegitimate relationship between a Hindu Dalit man and a Syrian Cristian woman; therefore, her very existence is an act of resistance. Being a masculine female, she is seen throughout the novel as doing the opposite of what is expected of her. She went to Kashmir due to her love for Musa, and the readers behold her emerge as a force against the power elite. She rents an apartment and uses a freezer to store Musa's documents. Hence, she plays an active part against the totalitarian government of a failing democracy.

Maoist, the freedom fighters of the forest, are declared terrorists by the government of India. They are the people who suffered at the hand of government oppression by being killed, starved and devoid of their basic rights. Comrade Revathy is a character who is tortured and repeatedly raped by the policemen for her allegiance with the Maoist party. She gives up her baby so that another person won't be at the disposal of the party or the policemen to be used as either a pawn or revenge. She defied the set rules according to which all Maoists should live and saved her daughter from a terrible fate.

Perhaps not so bright a spot in the resistance shown in the novel is by Hazrat Sarmad. He is the holy man whose shrine is mentioned by the author a few times. The Armenian Jewish merchant who fell in love with a boy in Sindh way back in time, killed by the Mughal Emperor for accepting and later denouncing orthodox Islam. He wouldn't recite the 'Kalima' beyond the first part, meaning there is no

God. He was in search of Him spiritually and therefore didn't bow down in front of the King. His insubordination gained him a place of a saint. His resistance became a symbol of love and "celebrated the virtue of spirituality over sacrament, simplicity over opulence and stubborn, ecstatic love even when faced with the prospect of annihilation" (10).

Resistance is seen at every level in the society in Roy's novel. The power points continuously exercise power at otherized sections. But it can be argued that the circulation of power makes it unstable. The huge gathering of people from all walks of life at Janter Manter is a resistance against the established elites of the society like the politicians, the industrialists or the religious power holders. The whole of the government's machinery is seen to be paralyzed by this protest. The people of the slum vandalize a new car on display, and a crowd paints obscene poetry on the walls of the portable toilet, which took fee in order to use it. Showcasing of luxury cars and toilet fee was an act of exercising power by the rich in an area of the poor. These incidents made that very power unstable.

## Conclusion

The present study has discussed that power, in the Foucauldian sense, is not something to attain or possess; rather, it is to be exercised continuously to get the desired effects. Power is an invisible force that works through various institutions of society, influencing the thoughts and actions of the people. Power is exercised on the sections which are at the wrong end of the power hierarchy. Because of that oppression, resistance is born to undermine and destabilize that very power. In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Arundhati Roy talks about various power centres present in society in general and in India in particular. She maps out various institutions working in the society, including the military, education and media, as the power centers holding power to make and shape public opinion. The press or media easily disregard any narrative going against their interests despite its truthfulness. The suppression because of these institutions works in a way that suppression becomes internalized in society. The people against whom this power is exercised no longer need surveillance. They start mistrusting each other, and their need for survival makes them a perfect representation of a panopticon

([Foucault, 1977](#)). Roy's book also shows that resistance can arise from this negative structure through different characters. When some particular sections of the society are placed at the opposite side of the power centers, they are destabilizing power itself, making it unstable.



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