



Arundhati's Literary Voice through the Lens of Rokeya's Subaltern Enlightenment: A Reading on *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* and *Padmarag*

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Abstract

“Subaltern” genders in South Asia denote the subordination of female gender and transgender, who cannot speak against the patriarchal social dominance. To make the subalterns speak, in 1924, Begum Rokeya in her *Padmarag*, and in 2017, Arundhati Roy in her *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, boldly resist in the same tone for the stigmatized and dispossessed against the social construction. To enlighten and boost up the silent spirits of the subalterns, Rokeya introduces “Tarini Bhaban” and Arundhati “Jannat Guest House,” two paradises full of reason, nature, freedom, progress, and happiness in the society of the Indian subcontinent. This paper aims to show “Jannat Guest House” and “Tarini Bhaban” as places of enlightenment for the subalterns, who are considered inferior rank in the society and family of the Indian subcontinent. The paper also explores the miserable socio-living conditions of those oppressed genders. In Rokeya's time, women named Tarini, Soudamini, and Sakina were marginalized in patriarchal social power and denied health, education, employment, liberty, and individuality. Also in Arundhati's novel, transgender Anjuman; straightforward woman Tilottoma, and many paradoxical identities are mistreated and rejected by their blood relations and excluded from any kind of social forms and organizations.

Keywords: Subaltern, Social Construction, Tarini Bhaban, Jannath Guest House, Enlightenment

Introduction

History repeats that revolutionary movements always hold their heads and chests against the oppressing domination of the socio-politics. Enlightening the subalterns is such a kind of revolution dominating South Asia from the early twentieth century, though subaltern critics and literary writers get their thought-recognition from Indian postcolonial time. This paper deals with Begum Rokeya (1880-1932) and Arundhati Roy (1961-the present), two prominent subaltern writers of the Indian subcontinent, where Arundhati is a

very recent revolutionary author who writes to make subalterns speak and act; that was also Begum Rokeya's revolution in her conservative time.

Subaltern study refers to the study of psychical and psychological surrendering of minorities to the power of the majority. This power is in the forms of cultural, political, social, racial, linguistic, economic, religious, and gender dominance. A societal image can be understood from the subaltern stance by the condition of the threatened, dominated, oppressed, and denied mass that come from different genders, castes, classes, religions, and races. Such displaced people's subordination is not always forceful but sometimes willing attempts, because day by day, the anti-subalterns capture, torture, and threaten the subalterns psychically and mentally by their self-pleasing law and constitution. Such long-lasting sufferings from all sides of a powerful force make the subalterns so helpless that they, individually or collectively, cannot gather the courage to speak against the violation and to create a social space for them. Subaltern critics and writers understand that the subalterns actually have no existence, as their souls are bound to the autocratic and double-standard social existence, and their life is nothing but less valuable than a single dust. In Hegel's words, "Self-consciousness exists in and for itself by virtue of the fact that it is in and for itself for another. That is, it exists only in being recognized" (Rauch & David, p. 20). The subaltern critics and writers realize that duplicated self-recognition never leaves a person free from social prison. Only the authentic acceptance of self-identity and self-consciousness against self-opposition by the person himself, that is called soul enlightenment, gives him social dignity and space.

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness (2017) is Arundhati Roy's resistant articulation to enlighten the Indian marginalized, who are victims of gender disparity. In this novel, she shows the extremely turbulent living of transgender people like Anjum, a non-conformist young woman, Tilottoma, and the women, who are socially cast away before their death. Having unusual sex, before being thrown out from society, Anjum's identity is firstly rejected and then unhappily accepted by her parents. After her birth, her mother hides her transgender identity for five years and raises her as a male child, Aftab. When her identity is open to her womanish attitude in a man's appearance, it becomes rough, and insecure for her to adjust herself in any corner of the masculine society. Then, Anjum finds herself comfortable, secure, and happy in a remote place beside a Muslim cemetery, where she builds her own worldly heaven, "Jannat Guest House." It is a place of no gender or caste discrimination, where Tilottoma, rejected by her parents and husband for her dark complexion, and Saddam Hossain, being socially oppressed because of his low caste identity, find a hearty environment. It is also a place of enlightenment, where lunatic women and prostitutes get respectful funerals, and the deprived get education, treatment, and good living. In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, "it is the living and the dead who sleep together, although only in the most literal sense of the word. There are no societal pressures or undue harassment for not being the usual sex." (Kashyap, 2019, p. 1).

Almost one hundred years ago, Begum Rokeya in her *Padmarag* (1924) spoke in the radical line of Arundhati to enlighten the subaltern women. In Rokeya's society, marital status is the only existence of a woman from any class and religion, and also this same status is a weapon to mistreat the women. In *Padmarag*, Rokeya presents the reality that in spite of belonging to different castes and classes, Tarini, Siddiqua, Soudamini, Sakina, Usha and Nalini bear the same trial either on marriage scaffold or after marriage. In her novella, without self-respect, self-consciousness and self-exploration, she views women's such social existence as non-existence, and stands to help these oppressed women earn individuality and self-dignity. For them, like Arundhati, she also creates a paradise on earth named 'Tarini Bhaban'; a center for shelter, education, treatment, and employment. In this center of enlightenment, the deprived and ex-communicated women nurture freedom of choice and warmly welcome a male guest or patient though males are always unjustly in giving them respect and space. Here, Rokeya has no vengeful complains against patriarchal society. Miah (2014) states,

The leitmotif of her writings was to make women realize their foolishness of becoming a willing prey to their men's cunning wishes of keeping them as lifelong captives. She talked about the adversity of women and expressed her utmost grievance over men; she accused men, in the most stinging words, of depriving women of receiving proper education, of not giving them opportunity to prove their 'efficiency,' of considering them as 'weak,' 'incompetent,' and 'inferior,' and of extending their helping hand, leading them to 'become slaves of indolence and, by extension, of men (p. 6).

This research paper finds similarity in both Arundhati and Rokeya's resistance to enlightening the subaltern genders of the society of the Indian subcontinent.

Literature Review

The non-subalterns react if the subalterns speak with the same meaning and authority of the non-subalterns that prioritizes the subalterns to the first place without acting reciprocally between power and knowledge (Beverley, 1999). Gender chauvinism is a kind of subaltern decree because Butler (2013) says that gender discrimination, by the execution of a particular gender role, does not only create social sovereignty but also economic despotism, which truly delineates the proper definition of gender. According to Gairola (2002), subaltern genders like transgender people, low-class people, and women are compelled to subordinate themselves to the superstructure of patriarchy that controls their life and breath. In the Indian subcontinent, subaltern women are superstitiously expected to emulate death and die on the pyre of their husbands to protect the respect of the dead ones. Moreover, Gairola (2002) hesitates to call the sacrifice of these women a

victim because powerful male domination washes their brains, and generates fear within them in so, far that they mindfully desire to die to protect their husbands' honor. Subaltern women's such conscience-denial sacrifice is pointless in this male-dominated society because, according to Hyde (1983), women are taken as property. Though they are genuinely social gems, they cannot strictly hold their own personality, and blindly they want to be someone's subject somewhere. That is, why the scholar, Gairola (2002), criticizes that if the subaltern people wish to see on the ground of 'human subjectivity,' they have to know themselves first and represent themselves, whatever they dare say and act.

Begum Rokeya is the first female in her society who advances the reason for women's suffering, resisting the multiplex social composition of femininity and multitudinous social facts (Hasan, 2004). Here, her feminist revolutionary is only social reforming, as she claims for social integrity in the line of proper recognition and redistribution (Haque and Rashid, 2018). In spite of being a practicing Muslim and upholding the Quran sincerely in her belief, she never does religious discrimination between Hindu and Muslim; rather, for the sake of justice, harmony, and peace, she unites all mankind (Quayum, 2015). Simply, she raises the objection against the anti-female social customs of her time and uses sarcasm as her principal literary approach (Ray, 2005). Rokeya's doctrine against gender inequality hits the conventional familial, rigid religious, and treacherous social outlook towards females because she repeatedly beseeches the enfeebled women to deny the life of bondage and dependency as well as to establish the women's right. She urges the males to let females explore their potentiality, update themselves with institutional education, and work outside the home (Miah, 2014). According to Haque and Rashid (2018), Rokeya finds out that discrimination in inheritance, de-recognition from society, and improper distribution of wealth make women fall into poverty that severely extends the distinction of self-respect and wealth along with social injustice. Hasan (2018) confidently says that Rokeya, in her writings, illuminates the sparkle of knowledge to free the women from the lethargic living conditions and awaken them to include themselves in education by not always being confined to domestic chores. Moreover, Islam and Islam (2012) also appreciate Rokeya, because she helps deprived women to open up their inner world to realize that they are treated as subhuman in this unequivocal male society for its own amenity.

Indian writer Arundhati Roy is an assertive revolutionary of her time, who is actively committed to fighting for the civil rights and social environment for the powerless, like third genders, who are forced, ignored, and rejected on the brink of society (Simoncelli, 2020). Gopinath (2019) notices Roy's enthrallment with subaltern experience and resistant articulation constantly rising in her novel. According to Mali (2019), Roy in her novel has nailed the perplexity, struggle, and total transformation of Anjum, who is a symbol of every tortured Hijra living in a socialist and communal country that fails to give civil rights to its

third gender by treating them as social shame. Mali (2019) also criticizes Roy's novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, as a social satire that attacks the way of Indian patriarchal dominance, which displaces the transgender, wildly deserts the Dalits, and silences the voice of the weakest. Shahbaz, Khushi, and Qasim (2020) point out that masculine society will never allow a transgender person to have a dream. Anjum dreams of being a mother of an adopted child, but this society does not wish to accept her dream, as it is unconventional for a transgender person to live with a child like a normal woman in the society. The society is ready to humiliate the person who attempts to break the conventional way of society for self-liberty, and that has happened to Anjum.

In the society and family of the Indian subcontinent, subaltern genders, specially Hijras, are taken socially unsteady and burdened. Both writers from different periods of the same culture show how the subalterns are denied and oppressed unlawfully. Researchers have yet to do any comparative work on Rokeya and Arundhati's subaltern enlightenment concept. This paper explores how Rokeya's 'Tarini Bhaban' and Arundhati's 'Jannat Guest House' enlighten the world of the socially offended.

Begum Rokeya's Literary Career

Begum Rokeya (1880-1932), a pioneer in the movement for the emancipation of women in Bengali Muslim society, wrote primarily for Muslim women from the clutch of repressive patriarchy that abused and exploited them by keeping them utterly ignorant as well as socially segregated and financially dependent on men. In her essay "Griha," Rokeya shows that all women in the Indian subcontinent are essentially "homeless," because no matter what castes, classes, or religions they belong to, they all have to live at the whim and mercy of men.

In her long essay entitled "The Degradation of Women," Rokeya's position is the best articulated. Challenging the misogynistic social system that treats women as nothing less than slaves. She argues that it is women who have brought the servitude upon themselves by surrendering their mind, body, and will to men and their patriarchal ideology. In *Ardhangi* (Female-half), she provides a full diagnosis of this issue and clarifies that the "female half" in society is plagued with mental slavery and a lack of opportunities. Rokeya reiterates that women need to challenge notions of patriarchy that contribute to their degraded status. She worked against the stereotype of being a veiled victim by using her abilities as a Bengali Muslim writer and educator to advance a movement that campaigned for women's issues.

***Padmarag* by Rokeya**

In *Padmarag* (1924), Begum Rokeya directly opposes the existing discrimination

and injustice between men and women and also points out the helplessness of women in the traditional social system during her time. *Padmarag* is both a powerful reflection of male oppression and a celebration of Rokeya's faith in a universalist society, where women reject the patriarchal society in favor of a life devoted to improving their status. *Padmarag* is a utopia "delineating," as Bagchi (2003) claims, "the thousand little details of an actual, real-life female-led reformist project" (p. 6). Particular care is taken to the girls so that "they become self-reliant and not lifeless puppets, burdens on their fathers, brothers, husbands, or sons." (Hossain, *Padmarag*, p. 31). They are given an idea that they are growing up as individuals to contribute to the society, like all other members of the society irrespective of gender differences. The portrayal of office life of women engaged in professional activity is a wonderful feature of *Padmarag*.

Subaltern Issues in *Padmarag*

The characters belong to subaltern class at Begum Rokeya's *Padmarag* are Tarini, Siddiqua, Latif, Soudamini, Sakina, Usha, Jainab's brother, and Nalini. Mistreatment is one of the common phenomena at the subaltern class. Marriage is the major ground to mistreat, and oppress a woman. In many speeches and writings, Begum Rokeya expresses her grief that slavery is banned formally, but at every house the condition of women is worse than slavery. She was greatly shocked with the question of slavery created in the society. She knew well that the mental slavery was attached with the issue of emotional labor. So, women should try to change their fate, and she believes that they should find a place free from mental and emotional slavery and patriarchal domination.

Tarini Bhaban in *Padmarag*

Tarini Bhaban is a paradise in the world for the deprived, where there is hope for the hopeless and philanthropic center for the under-privileged. It also plays role as a center for learning, shelter, and treatment and above all a place of enlightenment. This Bhaban is not for the cultured and civilized, but for the prostitutes, leprosy, and orphans. Here, there is no caste conflict, but wonderful solidarity among the subalterns. Everyone acts according to their patriotic awareness and self-dependence. Charity, business, and nursing are their prime concern. Here, they do not cultivate any pride and luxury but simplicity and generosity. The inhabitants of this house always stand against the hypocrisy of the masculine class. In time of their services at Tarini Bhaban, they do not consider castes, creeds, religions, and languages. To stand beside human beings as well as to work for humanity is their first priority.

Here, the characters take shelter for several reasons. For example, Siddiqua: being left for dowry, takes shelter at Tarini Bhaban. Latif sacrifices self-choice for society and

family. Soudamini arrives at Tarini Bhaban because of the oppression done upon her by in-laws and step mother. Sakina, for her dark complexion, finds no shelter except Tarini Bhaban. Usha is alleged by in-laws, and sold to brothel finally comes at Tarini Bhaban. Siddiqua decides not to be confined in unhealthy marriage structure, and dedicated to enlightening the societal culture. The traumatized forget their untold sufferings, and lead a divine life at Tarini Bhaban, which plays role as an alternative to suicide. The ideal of Tarini Bhaban is that here they become self-dependent, and give special attention that they won't be the burden towards their father, husbands, brothers, and sons. Through the image of Tarini Bhaban, Rokeya has tried to create an impression on the minds of the readers that a society, a state, and above all the whole world should be an ideal place so that everyone can live in peace and harmony breaking all forms of barriers, especially, the barrier of gender discrimination. As "egalitarianism" is present in Tarini Bhavan among Muslims, Christians, Brahmas, and Hindus, all work in harmony.

Enlightenment in Rokeya's *Padmarag*

Rokeya expresses her enlightening views in *Padmarag* and says that women are no longer play roles like dolls of clad that they will only meet the needs and desires of the males. She boldly declares that these days have been passed when the males will accept or reject women according their will. She wishes to demonstrate to society that they no longer allow men to kick them and kiss their footprints. Rokeya also believes that wearing jewelry does not bring any development of women rather it is just the utilization of money. Instead of decorating women with ornaments, if books are purchased with that money, women will be enlightened with knowledge and intellect. Rokeya expresses her desires in *Padmarag* that women are not born to lead a life like dolls. Therefore, women first need the scientific knowledge to change their fate.

Siddika, nicknamed *Padmarag*, the mysterious heroine, keeps the reader in suspense. The process of Siddika's evolution, from a solitary, secretive, and melancholic young girl to a competent, self-assured woman is ready to face the future. She begins to be self-reliant when she enters at Tarini Bhaban. Siddika has internalized the process of self-development and the fervent quest for a useful vocation that will help her to survive well. It incorporates "Rokeya's faith in women's education as holding the key to a world where women are happy and powerful." (Bagchi, p. 6) Siddika is the representative of a land, that provides her with the opportunities of becoming a human rather than a woman. Rokeya intends to bring Siddika before the people, so that Bangladeshi girls may get inspiration to stand on their own feet as most of the girls in Bangladesh have the experience of being the victims of cruelties by the patriarchal social system. The author has the insight of building Bangladesh as a country, where a girl will have the scopes to turn away from melancholy, loneliness, and agonies, and build a respectable life.

Arundhati Roy's Literary Career

Arundhati Roy (1961), an Indian author, a political activist involved in human rights and environmental issues, is best known for her novel *The God of Small Things* (1997). She wrote *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) after twenty years of her devotion to *The God of Small Things*. She has got recognition as a modern feminist alongside the source of inspiration of the oppressed and suppressed women of India. Moreover, her ardent support to the *Nokshals*, and the political oppressed people of Kashmir has made her an uncompromising champion of the equality and justice in the present Indian society.

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness by Roy

Writer-activist Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* addresses a wide range of issues namely corruption, political violence, division between human beings, and the capitalism etc. facing contemporary Indian society. Much of the violence that the characters observe and experience in the novel stems from religious and class conflicts.

Subaltern Issues: *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

The name that the inhabitants of the graveyard call Anjum emphasizes her position on the margins of society. By calling her a "clown without a circus" or a "queen without a palace," the people in the graveyard emphasize the fact that she is a person without a context, without a place in a society. Anjum clearly belongs to some sort of social group, that is particularly excluded from traditional practices and norms. People like Anjum aren't created that she belongs to a group of people who are worthy of traditional rites. She also implies that in God's eyes, all people are worthy of a respectful burial. However, Hijra Nimmo's view starkly contrasts with Aftab's. While Aftab sees beauty in the world of the *Khwabgah*, Nimmo sees a group of people who are incapable of happiness because their identities are so marginalized that they do not even make sense to mainstream society. Nimmo demonstrates that she believes the difficulty *Hijras* face doesn't come from a society that doesn't respect their identity, but rather from a genuine internal conflict between the masculine and feminine identities.

When Aftab begins to experience his body behaving in ways that conflict with his gender identity, he understands the deep internal conflict Nimmo has spoken of. His choice to move outside of the *Duniya*, the real world, demonstrates that he has fully recognized himself as a marginalized person, and chosen to embrace both the joys and challenges of that experience. The disrespects Rubina's body faces show how discriminatory mainstream society is against sex workers. Low-caste tears are ignored by the society and by the government too.

Jannath Guest House of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

Since Tilo's arrival, the Jannat Guest House community has grown more family-like. She begins giving singing lessons to promising students there those who attend. Aftab is fascinated by the house and its residents, mostly ustad Khulsum bi who is the head of the house, and Aftab befriends Nimmo, a *Hijra* who "would have been beautiful but for her fast-growing facial hair" and obsessed with Western women's fashion." (*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, p. 22) But still, her house and the community she forms around it slowly grow. She names the guest house Jannat, meaning "paradise" (p. 68).

Many of the guests at Jannat guest House are hijras who have "fallen out of, or been expelled from, the tightly administered grid of Hijra Gharanas." (p. 68) One of them is Nimmo, a large, beautiful woman and the owner of a successful business that sells goats for slaughter on particularly on Eid. Nimmo gifts Anjum with a beautiful ram to rear and slaughter for Eid one year. She raises him with great care, as she believes "love, after all, is the ingredient that separates a sacrifice from ordinary, everyday butchery" (p. 69).

Anjum's choice of name for her new home and guest house has an interesting double meaning. Naming it "paradise" suggests that she and the other inhabitants are no longer living and have gone to heaven, which speaks to Anjum's total departure from the Duniya, or the real world. But secondly, calling the home paradise reflects Anjum's high opinion of the home she has created for herself and will create for others. On the margins of a hellish and violent society, she has created a safe haven where she and others like her can be safe and happy. Anjum's observation is that social isolation and marginalization force people to coexist who wouldn't normally associate with one another.

Enlightenment in Arundhati's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

Anjum even arranges for Jannat Guest House to have a swimming pool— "Why should only rich people have swimming pools?" (p. 400) she says, indignantly. There is no water, but the poor know how to appreciate the pool all the same. And, "all in all, with a People's Pool, a People's Zoo, and a People's School, things are going well in the old graveyard" (p. 400). One day, Nimmo asks AnjumAftab why God made hijra. She answers her own question, saying that it was an experiment that God wanted to create something that was totally incapable of happiness. Aftab protests, saying he loves the Khwabgah and that everyone seems happy there. Nimmo disagrees, going on to say that everything that makes normal people unhappy is outside of them—cost of living, abusive husbands, disappointing children, Hindu-Muslim conflicts. But, she says, for *Hijras*, "The riot is inside us. The war is *inside* us. Indo-Pak is *inside* us. It will never settle down. It can't" (p. 23).

Finally, at the Khwabgah, AnjumAftab is able to dress the way she's always

dreamed of. She gets her nose pierced and wears elaborate feminine clothes, pulling her short hair back and weaving it into a braid of extensions. On Anjum's eighteenth birthday, ustad Khulsoom Bi throws her a party, and, that night, she dreams that she is a new bride on her wedding night. To her dismay, she wakes up to find that she had an orgasm during the night, and came into her new red sari. Dismayed, Anjum speaks with Kulsoom Bi, who comforts her saying that hijras are bodies in which a Holy Soul lives. Kulsoom Bi also encourages Anjum to undergo gender transition surgery, saying that it is not against Islam.

Aftab's observation that the woman, who is a *Hijra*, wouldn't be able to dress that way if she were a "real" woman is interesting, and complicates readers' understanding of *Hijras* as being marginalized, oppressed, and discriminated against. In some ways, *Hijras* are more powerful than cis-gendered women in the world of the novel and have more liberty to express themselves freely. In this way, the margins of society are not just a place of oppression, but also a place of liberation. Zakir Mian is "too old" to be embarrassed about Anjum's gender identity suggests that strong attachment to societal norms is something to be outgrown; the older and wiser someone is, the less particular they become about judging whether or not those around them are socially acceptable or marginalized. Tilo decides not to be confined in unhealthy marriage structure and dedicated to enlightening the societal culture.

Conclusion

This paper finds the literary comparison between Beguma Rokeya's *Padmarag* and Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* from the point of view of Subaltern enlightenment. In *Padmarag*, Rokeya shows the oppressed and under-privileged women named Tarini, Siddiqua, Latif, Soudamini, Sakina, Usha, Jainab's brother, and Nalini who come at Tarini Bhaban and get enlightened. Similarly, after a century, Arundhati in her *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* portrays the untold sufferings and mental agony of the subaltern and transgender women called Anjum, Tilo and Nimmo who after coming at Jannath Guest House feel dignity and enlightenment. Therefore, Tarini Bhaban and Jannath Guest House turn to be two Utopias and paradises for the homeless and the helpless subaltern and transgender women where they nurture freedom, dignity, and happiness.

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