

Marxist Study of Arundhati Roy's The Ministry of Utmost Happiness

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Abstract:

In this study Arundhati Roy's The Ministry of Utmost Happiness has been probed in the light of Marxism. The elements of commodification and class consciousness have been interpreted and analyzed. The study further unveils the role of ideology to economically marginalize and outcast the labor class and vice versa. In this novel Roy demonstrates that when our working class is crushed by the cruel hands of capitalism it results in a very horrible form of revolt or revenge by the victims. By doing that, Roy delineates the characters who are forced to work like machines and a commodity for the interests of the capitalists. The characters who intend to raise voice against this capitalism become a prey to the ideological mechanism supporting the exploitative practices of capitalism. The study follows the parameters of qualitative research and the selected passages have been interpreted as textual evidences to examine Marx's thoughts about Capitalism and the atrocities done by the capitalists.

Keywords: Commodification, Class Consciousness, Ideology, The Ministry of Utmost Happiness

Background of the Study:

The present research intends to explore Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* in the light of Marxism. The particular focus of this research is to probe the instances of Commodification and class consciousness in the selected text. The researcher through this

research investigates Arundhati Roy's perspective about the role of ideologies to sustain and support the exploitative practices of Capitalism. The present study is an endeavor to unveil the socially sponsored oppression and institutionalized manipulation of the economically marginalized strata of society. The study is based upon the theoretical framework of Marxism proposed by Karl Marx. The Proletariat's struggle to survive and fight against the atrocities of the capitalists and capitalism has been interpreted in the light of Marxism.

Arundhati Roy is termed as the most radical writer of this decade. Even though she was born in an upper caste family she looks at the society from the view point of marginalized community. She got international fame for her debut novel *The God of Small Things*. Her works embody realism, political and social crisis and empathy for humanity. This paper attempts to understand her mind as a writer and explores the multidimensional and multi layered story of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. The fiction holds the unbearable truths of society such as wretched condition of Dalit, humiliated life of Transgender, mediocre government, rape, murder and more over the story is about the marginalized group of people who are victim of injustice, inequality and prejudice.

Research Objectives:

- i) To explore the instances of class consciousness and commodification in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*
- ii) To examine the ways through which ideology reinforces the system of capitalism

Research Questions

- 1) What are the instances of class consciousness and commodification in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*
- 2) How does ideology reinforce the system of capitalism?

Statement of Problem

This research focuses on how the capitalism has crushed and is still crushing the proletariat in India, while exploiting political, religious, social and racial ideologies. More over it will try to show how the working class is completely deprived of their fundamental rights and has been forced systematically to live in ghettos in utter poverty. Consequently, in what way the capitalist system enrages the proletariat that could result in a revolution. In addition to that, this study will delve deep into the implicit allusions and symbolism used in this novel to predict a revolution.

Significance of the study:

The present study is important because it studies a South-Asian writer, Arundhati Roy whose works are not limited to the contemporary issues at national level but the horizon of her works extends to the international level. The study is significant for the readers and researchers of sub-continent because it exposes a layers of marginalization based upon capitalism.

Delimitation:

This study tends to analyze the Marxism in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. The technique of close reading of selected text has been used to conduct the study of this paper. It also highlights the results of continuous class struggle. There were a lot of writers who wrote in this style of writing. This examination is delimited to the analysis of elements of Marxism in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*.

Research Methodology:

In my study the researcher has followed the parameters of qualitative research and focused on the texts of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* as a primary source of data. The research is based on a close reading and a thorough analysis of these texts. To reach at the findings, textual evidences have been interpreted in the light of the concepts involved in the Marxism. The available literary critical writings, reviews and commentaries published in national and international press regarding the fiction of Arundhati Roy have been referred to and utilized to support and understand the research findings. Interviews of Arundhati Roy, published in the magazines and available on web will definitely help to get a clear glimpse of the author's mind and intentions and to reach at a conclusion.

Literature Review:

Royanian and Omrani (2016) in *Class Oppression and Commodification in Shakespeare's Hamlet and Merchant of Venice* have explored the instances of commodification and class oppression in Shakespeare's selected plays. The study finds out that through Shakespeare's writing one can observe that Marxism has always been an unconscious of the writers as Marx and Engles state in *Communist Manifesto*, "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" (p. 219). Though Karl Marx was born a long time after Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* yet Shakespeare's writings reflect the role of capitalism and ideologies in suppressing economically marginalized. Marx himself during his discussion about Marxism has referred towards Hamlet who is being addressed as old mole, behaving as a King even with his daughters. In the light of class difference, the struggle between class and commodification of the poor in *The Merchant of Venice*, Marx diverts the readers' attention towards the roots of

Capitalism in the Venetian society, “the Gentile Venetian society” was “a newborn bourgeois capitalist society, no longer feudal, not yet industrial” (Bloom, p. 139). So it is absolutely true that though Marx gave name to the practices of capitalism and commodification yet they have always been a part of human history.

Awan and Raza (2016) have studied the heinous impacts of Marxism and Totalitarianism in George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). The researchers have examined the role of ideologies and history to develop dystopian world. They have interlinked Totalitarianism, Marxism, and dystopia, and concluded that these three arise from and give rise to one another. George Orwell’s novels, *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) are imbued with the elements of totalitarianism and Marxism which form the dystopian systems of government. The study concludes that the history proves that the historical events like the Russian revolution have been managed with the help of ideology which make commodification of human beings possible. The historical revolutions have actually been the events organized for self-interest by those who control power with the help of ideologies which reduce Man to the status of a machine. Marxism and totalitarianism too are in fact the systems to satisfy the greed for money and power in the guise of government policies and revolutions. The researchers find out that since the beginning of human history the labor class has been instrumental for the class with capitalism.

John (2017) in *A Microcosm of Life and Death: Review of The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* has probed a saga of life and death in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. He studies Roy’s skill to join a series of shattered stories of the characters simultaneously revolving around life and death. In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* too Roy quite skillfully

draws a mixture of tragic and funny and grave and light. The novel is basically about the dark history of India but here we can hear the echoes of Anjum's laughter, and Musa's love Miss Jabeen. Roy colors the grim picture of the Indian society with the jokes, repartee and humor of her characters. A group of marginalized living in graveyard is painful but the *Jannat* this marginalized strata makes is full of peace and comfort. John (2017) while discussing the nature of Roy's fiction concludes that it is hard to answer the question whether the novel is about the life story of a transgender or a historical fiction or a political satire. Roy's canvas of writing is broad enough to give a vivid picture of the feelings of utmost happiness and the pain of marginalization.

In A Study on Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Smita (2007) examines the quality of transparency in Arundhati Roy's grim picture of India and its society. Roy courageously exposes the shameful truths about the social structures of India and the role of the Indian government to promote the systems sustaining suppression and manipulation. Her works give a representation to the Naxals, the transgender community, women being treated as second class citizens, and all socially marginalized having the status of taboos.

Raina too in her research study, *Transgender Marginalization and Exclusion: A Study of Arundhati Roy's The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* studies Roy's efforts to represent the transgender community. The researcher studies the gender based exploitation portrayed by Arundhati Roy. These studies have been an inspiration for the researcher to do the current study in the light of Marxism.

Theoretical Framework:

The term Marxism, Capitalism and Commodification are directly linked to critical theory of Karl Marx. According to Karl Marx Capitalism

can only thrive on the exploitation of working class. He is of the view that Capitalism is not only an economic conflict produces class. (Bourgoise, Proletariat). This novel “The Ministry of Utmost Happiness” has been viewed through the lense of Marxism. Class struggle and commodification which has been shown in this novel would be analyzed and interpreted through this. Karl Marx the inventor of this theory. Marxism is a political theory that has shaped world politics for over 150 years.

According to Molyneux’s Marxism is not just the theory of the Proletarian’s resistance to Capitalism and struggle against Capitalism and above all the theory of its victory. According to Das Kapital “The Capital class becomes unfit to rule, because it is incompetent to assure an existence to its slave within his slavery”

The most significant element is class struggle that emerges among the members of working class since they sell their labors to employers. This struggle is so considerable because it put forward the class oppression that s development. To Marxists ,this oppression will lead to a revolt by the workers for establishing a classless society .Marxism is antithesis of capitalism. “Marx claims that the species-being of man consists in labor and that man is alienated to the extent that labor is performed according to a division of labor that is dictated by the market” (Rosen,1998,p. 1). In Marxism the dominant feature is public ownership of means of production. Under Capitalism, the proletariat and working class only own their capacity to work. They have right only to sell their labor. To Marx, a class is defined by the relations of its members to the means of production. Marx thinks that the workers get minimum wage for surviving with their family. This is caused by the capitalist system. The workers act like alienated because they haven’t any control over their labor or product that they produce. Due to this fact, to Marx, a proletariat

or socialist revolution must occur. The reason for this revolt can also be seen as that the workers under capitalist class become miserable. They even lose their religious beliefs. Moreover, the bourgeois class objects to freedom of working class. Marxists have sympathy for the working class and proletariat.

To them, the condition of workers is the same all over the world. So, their position is universal. To them, there should be class consciousness or class awareness in order not to come across a class revolt. The ruling class controls the society's means of production, the superstructure of The profit gained by the capitalist is the difference between the value of the product made by the worker and the actual wage that the workers receive. In other words, capitalists pay workers less than the real value of their labor. Because of this fact, the workers become isolated day by day. Thus, alienation is an unavoidable result of capitalism. The working circumstances do not allow workers to feel and think. In capitalist societies the workers sell their labor but they do not own the means of production. The workers' salary is not enough when their labor is compared with the production. The bourgeois own the Uluslararası Sosyal Araştırmal means of production. So, they exploit the proletariat. In capitalist societies different classes have different lives and even their education is different. With the beginning of industrialism, the position of people began to change, that is, the capitalists began to rule the workers. Then the capitalists started to ignore the workers capacities and abilities.

However, what the workers produced is so important determining the value of them. Since the workers work so much and in so hard conditions, other people should give them importance and appreciate their work. "The resistance of working classes toward oppression from the

capitalist sometimes triggers a revolution in which working class wants to change their life and get a better life” In other words, the continuous struggle causes revolt “in which the proletarian class will win and non-class society will spread” (Helemejko, p. 9). Additionally, Marxist concepts are stated as “class consciousness, sacrifice, revolution, social antithesis and social injustice” (Stearns & Burns, 2011, p. 1). The literature after Industrial Revolution was affected by the changes in many fields of life in Britain and “the society of the writer will be reflected on his/her writings” by using the theory of Marxism (Radja, 2014, p. 12). Mainly, he/ she tends to demonstrates social and economic progress.

Data Analysis:

Tyson (2006) while discussing Marxism indicates towards the concept of Commodification which is, “Commodification is the act of relating to objects or persons in terms of their exchange value or sign-exchange value”, “Finally, I commodify human beings when I structure my relations with them to promote my own advancement financially or socially (Tyson, p. 85). In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* Arundhati Roy registers many instances of commodification. Saddam is the one who struggles to alleviate his financial status with struggle and hard work. But he suffers from being commoditized by the Elite and capitalist class of India. Saddam after joining Anjum’s residence in the graveyard tells her the tragic story of his eyes burned by a steel tree. Saddam served as a guard in a company Safe n’ Sound Guard Service managed by Sangeeta Madam. He was sent to National Gallery of Modern Art where he had to guard the exhibit of an exquisitely made utterly life-like stainless-steel Banyan tree. It was painful to keep on looking on the steel reflecting sun light. But he tried to manage it and spoiled his eyes which watered and smarted continuously. Sangeeta Madam instead of

spending money on his treatment fired him from Safe n' Sound Guard Service.

Sadam Hussain is a representative of those who have courage to speak against the exploitative capitalist practices. After getting dismissed from Safe n' Sound Security Guard Service he does not quietly bear it. He calls the exploitative madam terrible names. He is not one of those who reinforce the system of their own exploitation. He unlike the poor class of India is ready to do whatever he wants with whatever the huge price he has to pay. He gets inspiration from the Iraqi President, Saddam Hussein, whose grace and elegance is a disappointment for his executioners. Saddam knows that his meager endeavor to challenge and question his surroundings may lead towards something more terrible than execution but he wants to do this with the dignity and grace of Saddam Hussein, "I want to be this kind of bastard, I want to do whatever I have to do and then, if I have to pay a price, I want to pay it" (Roy, p. 164).

Arundhati Roy in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* has given a description of the stone workers who are prey to the practice of commodifying labor class. The city stone workers working to build gigantic plazas, shopping malls and buildings turn into this stone and the part of soul in their lungs hardly gets released, "Tilo wondered how to un-know some things she did not want to know, for example to un-know that those who died of stone dust their lungs refused to be cremated, after the whole body turned into ashes the lungs remained unburned like two slabs of stone having lung shape" (Roy, p.428). The stone workers serve the interests of the capitalist class at the cost of their self-negation. This self-negation does not change their status of being economically marginalized and the loss they suffer is irreparable. These workers after spending their

lives in the service of the capitalist class can't die peacefully and their souls too face the consequences.

Gayatri Spivak in her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* talks about the role of ideology in managing obedience and dedication for the capitalist class. In this regard she quotes Althusser, "The reproduction of labor power requires not only a reproduction of its skills but also at the same time, a reproduction of its submission to the ruling ideology for the workers, and reproduction of the capacity to exploit the ruling ideology correctly for the agents of manipulation and repression, so that they will in and by words ensure the domination of the ruling class" (p. 68). The resourceful elite class controls resources and the fate of the poor and economically marginalized class. The bourgeois through the exploitation of the laborers' interest ensures their suppression and loyalty to the capitalists' vested interests. The laborer like Saddam submit to the capitalists only for the hope of a better future and this hope throws him in even more misery. As Madam Sangeeta manages to get this loyalty from Saddam, "I 'll be watching you, if you can prove you are a good worker, I will make you a supervisor in three months" (p. 134). This hope for the future prospect keeps the labor class submitted to the Capitalist Elite, and the history proves that the capitalist elite always used this submission for their best advantage.

The ideological grounds to promote class difference have always been unshakeable. It is only this mechanism of ideology which makes the economically marginalized class not only bear this exploitation but reinforce it. At the end of the novel when Anjum and Co. make their own world which they name as Jannat, one of the residents of Jannat asks Saddam to chase out the cows living there. The police in India just in the pretext of killing cows confiscates the property of the poor., "That's how

they do it these days. They accuse you of eating beef and then take over your house and your land... it's all about property, not cows" (p. 656). The religious bias against the Muslims who kill and eat cow accompanies different forms of economic manipulation, and it is only ideology which sustains religious biasness.

In India the caste system determines the type of work and labor one has to do. The lower class is never privileged with the right to choose its work or type of labor. Velutha Nivedita Menon (2019) summarizes the maltreatment and cruelty based upon caste system, "Caste system in India determines labor, and the labor is further determined by gender" (Menon, p. 138). Arundhati Roy in her essay *The Doctor and the Saint* summarizes the role of caste based hierarchy in deciding the choice of work for the lower class, "To breathe and live, a Dalit worker is forced to clean 172,000 open-discharge toilets with open hands in the biggest railway station of India" (Roy, p. 21). Saddam Hussain in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is a victim of this class boundary, he hides his identity and when Anjum comes to know his identity she calls him *chamar*, "Anjum does not call him Dalit but a *Chamar*. Dalit being an modern term for the Untouchables is unacceptable for Anjum, in the same spirit in which she refused to refer to herself as anything other than *Hijra*" (Roy, p. 85). The above given lines show that it is only reverence for the traditions which work as a force to make the oppressed not only least vulnerable to resistance but happy too with whatever pains are inflicted upon them. (p. 85). The upper class of India is privileged to not touch the dead cows, and Sadam is called *chamar* because he collects carcass of the dead cows. Ambedkar (1956) sheds light on these privileges based upon caste structure, "In the pyramid of caste the top is always bestowed with a plenty of entitlements and the bottom has neither entitlements nor purity"

(p. 15). The station house officer charges undue amount to Saddam Hussain for passing the road and when he can't pay the amount the station house officer terribly beats him.

In the pyramid of caste based hierarchy the Upper Class (top) assigns duties to the lower caste (bottom) which is considered polluted. Saddam and his father after finishing their work are charged to pay for crossing the road. They are charged the triple amount which they can't pay. The station house officer arrests them on the charge of cow slaughter, "People have beaten them and killed them for this reason "Everybody watched. Nobody stopped them" (p. 89). The Muslim minorities in India are executed for killing cows and the dominant ideologies support this execution.

The caste and class doubly marginalize women. It is only because of the ideologically maintained caste structure that Revathy is rejected by her father's family because she is black and belongs to the backward caste Settibalija. (p. 419). As Ravethy's father asks his wife to wear short dresses and do ballroom dancing (p. 418) and physically abuses with blades and complains that she can't satisfy him (p. 419). This exploitation of a commodified woman never ends here. When Revathy's mother gets pregnant her father throws her out of his home, "he would torture her, cut her and send her back" (p. 419). A critical and objective analysis can reveal that this physical torture accompanied by the psychological pain is inevitable consequence of being from a lower class and caste. Gangoli (2011) indicates towards the root cause of the fate women undergo in India, "In spite of these rights, women's position in Indian society is highly variable, and depends to a large extent on class and caste" (Gangoli, p. 102). These women are conditioned to happily face and accept their fate, and instead of speaking against these manipulative

practices they reinforce the system of their own exploitation. This double marginalization of being a woman and being a member of lower class never lets the words about justice for women counted.

Arundhati Roy through the characters like Revathy raises voice for such women whose class makes them vulnerable to the social oppression and commodification. Even though her mother has no voice to ask for justice, yet she is given a narrative voice by Roy in her fiction. Furthermore, Revathy being a female communist party member has to suffer a lot. She is hated by Police because of her gender, “Maximum hatred police had for women workers” (Roy, p.420). Roy delineates the torture and violence women are subjected to. The brutal gender biased police kills Comrade Laxmi Nirmalakka and rips her stomach, and it kills, cuts and removes Comrade Laxmi’s eyes. There was a big protest for Comrade Laxmi’s death and during this protest Comrade Padmakka was captured, her knees were broken and she was beaten to such severity as damaged her kidney and liver (Roy, p. 421).

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness registers many instances of Marxist Feminism. Revathy is a woman who is commodified for being economically weak and dependent. The pain she undergoes is not only physical but psychological too. She was undressed and one of the policemen cuts her skin with knife and asks her in a derogatory manner, “So you think you are a great heroine?” “We want to give you a gift for your Party.” They are smoking and putting their cigarettes on me. “You people shout a lot! Shout now and see what happens!” [...] Settle down quietly. But first we will give you some marriage experience.” They kept on burning me and cutting me. But I am not crying at all. “Why don’t you scream? Your great leaders will come and save you. You people don’t scream?” Then one man forced to open my mouth and one man put his

penis in my mouth. I could not breathe. I thought I would die. They kept putting water on my face. Then all raped me many times. One is Udaya's father. Which, how can I say? I was unconscious. When I walked again I was bleeding everywhere (Roy, p. 423). (423). The only effective weapon men have against women is rape. Roy has multiple times referred towards the vulnerability of women's body. From Tilo to Revathy her women characters suffer from the pain of their bodies. It is evident that Roy in her writing has been practicing a critique of biological essentialism. She points out the practice of using women as a commodity.

Conclusion:

The present study after a thorough analysis of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* in the light of Marxism concludes that Arundhati Roy has sincerely exposed the capitalist practices in India. Through her characters she has not only delineated the exploitation and manipulation of the working class but she has pointed out the role of ideology to maintain this control of capitalists on human resources and labor. Arundhati Roy's characters even after being crushed under the burden of class consciousness never behave as victims. They are commodified but they are neither unaware nor too passive to resist against this commodification. The present study may be a contribution to understand the multilayered marginalization sponsored by the social institutes and dominant ideologies, and this understanding can further lead towards some steps of change even though very meagre steps!!

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