



Postcolonialism in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

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ABSTRACT

Arundhati Roy is one of the most prominent Indian writers in English and is also a social activist. She is the first Indian writer to receive the Booker Prize, one of the most prestigious awards. Most of Arundhati Roy's works are non-fictional. She has written two novels so far, out of which *The God of Small Things* (1997) was her first novel. Arundhati Roy wrote *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) twenty years after her first novel. This paper focuses on the postcolonial theme in Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. It examines the main character Anjum, a hermaphrodite as an embodiment of postcolonialism. Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity and mimicry has been applied in the study of the novel to examine the after effects of colonialism.

Keywords: culture, identity, hybridity, mimicry, in-betweenness,
postcolonialism

Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2004), in their book *Key Concepts in Postcolonial Studies* says that Postcolonialism is a term originally used by historians after the Second World War. The simpler sense of 'post' colonialism as meaning 'after' colonialism has been contested by a more elaborate understanding of the working of postcolonial cultures which stresses the articulations between and across the politically defined historical periods, of pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial cultures. Postcolonialism is now used in wide and diverse ways to include the study and analysis of European territorial conquests, the various institutions of European colonialisms, the discursive operations of empire, the subtleties of subject construction in colonial discourse and the resistance of those subjects and most importantly perhaps the differing responses to such incursions and their contemporary colonial legacies in both pre- and post- independence nations and communities. Some of the most prominent postcolonial theorists include Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Franz Fanon and Gayatri Spivak (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, pp.186-187).

Homi Bhabha is one of the most important figures in contemporary postcolonial studies, and has developed a number of postcolonial concepts like hybridity, mimicry, deference, and ambivalence. Hybridity is a concept that has been popularized by Homi Bhabha. According to Vanessa Guignery, "The word hybridity has its origins in biology and botany where it designates a crossing between two species by cross-pollination that gives birth to a third "hybrid" species" (Guignery, Pessó-Miquel, & Specq, 2011, p. 2). She also says that hybridity is linked to the notion of identity for multicultural individuals, migrants and diasporic communities. It is also linked with people of multiple identities and mixed origins who experience their hybridity with more or less serenity and whom society welcomes with varying degrees of benevolence. "These 'in-between' people or hyphenated communities occupy a displaced position which can provoke a sense of fragmentation, dislocation and discontinuity, both in terms of space and time" (Guignery, Pessó-Miquel, & Specq, 2011, p. 5). According to Bhabha, "In mimicry, the representation of identity and meaning is

rearticulated along the axis of metonymy” (Bhabha, 1994, p.90). He says that “the figure of mimicry is locatable within what Anderson describes as ‘inner compatibility of empire and nation’. It problematizes the signs of racial and cultural priority, so that the ‘national’ is no longer naturalizable” (Bhabha, 1994, p.87).

According to Bhabha, hybridity has frequently been used in postcolonial discourse to mean simply cross-cultural ‘exchange’. However, for him it is much more than that. He is of the view that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in a space and that space according to him is the “Third space of enunciation”. It is the ‘in-between’ space that carries the burden and meaning of culture, and this is what makes the notion of hybridity so important (Bhabha, 1994).

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) revolves around a character named Anjum (Aftab) who is a hijra. She was a hermaphrodite as she was born with both the sexual organs of a male and a female. However, Anjum's parents choose to identify her as a male and thus named him Aftab. It was only later that Aftab became Anjum. The novel portrays the complexities and struggles that Anjum undergoes in her quest for finding her true self as she was neither male nor female. The “in-between” identity of Anjum and her “patched together” body depicts the cultural conflict of the colonized countries after colonization. These complexities and identity issues of Anjum can be referred to as a metaphor for the diaspora of the colonized countries after colonization.

Mimicry, according to Homi Bhabha, is stricken by interminacy, and it emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process. He says that, “mimicry is thus a sign of a double articulation: a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power” (Bhabha, 1994, p.85). Mimicry in postcolonialism is thus understood as the endless effort of the colonized people to imitate the colonizers. This idea of mimicry is very prominent in Roy's novel in regard to Anjum's identity. The character of Anjum can be considered as an embodiment of colonization. Her ‘patched together’ body represents transculturalism as well as the diaspora of the colonized people after colonization. All

throughout colonization, the colonizers dominated the colonized people in every way. They imposed their own culture over them which made the colonized people suppress their own culture. Similar to the way in which Anjum’s parents decided to identify her as a male though a part of her was female which made young Anjum to suppress her ‘real’ sexuality until she grew up and decided to end the suppression and oppression and find her true self. Like the colonizers considered their culture to be superior, in a patriarchal society the male figure is considered to be superior; thus this could be one of the reasons behind Anjum being identified as a man rather than as a female. Anjum was a hermaphrodite who possessed both the traits of male and female and though the male characteristics were more dominant she considered herself as a woman. Anjum’s identity slowly began to change as she grew up. There is power struggle as she tries to come out of her male body. The fact that Anjum dressed and acted like a woman is a form of mimicry. She dressed “in the clothes she longed to wear – the sequined, gossamer kurtas and pleated Patiala salwars, shararas, ghararas, silver anklets, grass bangles and dangling earrings. She had her nose pierced and wore an elaborate, stone studded nose-pin, outlined her eyes with khol and blue eye shadow and gave herself a luscious, bow-shaped Madhubala mouth of glossy-red lipstick. Her hair would not grow very long, but it was long enough to pull back and weave into a plait of false hair” (Roy, 2017, p.26). This shows how Anjum tried to identify herself through imitation and mimicry as she also “learned to exaggerate the swing in her hips when she walked” (Roy, 2017, p.27). Here, the word “learned” is something which needs to be pondered on as it reflects that what she does is not something which has been acquired naturally. It represents a form of imitation or mimicry. Her identity is not natural and it is somehow self-made as she only identifies herself with the second sex. Thus, it can be said that she inculcates intermingling of culture and multiculturalism in the way the colonized people often tends to do. The colonized people often tend to imitate the culture of the colonizers knowingly or unknowingly which often leads to the risk of losing their own cultural identity. Even after the end of colonization the European cultures are very much alive among the once colonized people. Hybridity seem to be everywhere with endless effort of the colonized people to follow western lifestyle. One of the main reasons

behind this endless effort of imitation can be the superiority-inferiority complex which had been uprooted in the minds of the people during colonization. Mimicry in postcolonialism can also be considered as a form of power struggle as the so called inferior ones try to imitate their superiors. Anjum, as an in-between individual, tries to fit into the socially constructed norm of being a woman by imitating the gestures of women in every way maybe because her own identity was unknown and because she was considered as indifferent.

In Anjum's attempt of being a woman, her male body always intervened. "On Anjum's eighteenth birthday Ustad Kulsoom Bi threw a party for her in the Khwabgah. Hijras gathered from all over the city, some came from out of town. For the first time in her life Anjum wore a sari, a red 'disco' sari, with a backless choli. That night she dreamed she was a new bride on her wedding night" (Roy, 2017, p.27). However, to her dismay, "her sexual pleasure had expressed itself into her beautiful new garment like a man's" (Roy, 2017, p.27). To this, Anjum sat in the courtyard and howled like a wolf. Distressed, she started hitting herself on the head and between her legs, screaming with self-inflicted pain. No matter how hard she tried, she could neither become a complete man nor a complete woman. Her identity always lied in-between. This also depicts the dilemma of the colonized people in neither being able to completely adapt the culture of the colonizers nor being able to embrace their own culture truly. This assimilates Ralph Singh's apostasy in Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*. Bhabha quotes Naipaul as, "We pretend to be real, to be learning, to be preparing ourselves for life, we mimic men of the New World, one unknown corner of it, with all its reminders of the corruption that came so quickly to the new" (Bhabha, 1994, p.88). Not only Anjum, but also other complex characters like Razia and Baby who lives in Khwabgah can also be considered as an embodiment of postcolonialism. Razia is another complex character in the novel who has lost her mind as well as her memory and she no longer knew who she was or where she came from. She was not a Hijra but "she was a man who liked to dress in women's clothes. However, she did not want to be thought of as a woman, but as a man who wanted to be a woman" (Roy, 2017, p.22). Similarly, "Baby, like Razia, was a man who wanted to remain a man but be a woman in every way" (Roy, 2017, p.28). However, Baby

didn't lose her mind like Razia. These two characters are representatives of how some colonized people while imitating the cultures of the colonizers still holds on to their own culture and does not let go of it. However, they do not completely adapt the culture of the colonizers nor completely dwell in their own culture. And these makes their identity even more complex. Another character in the novel who is referred to as the landlord and who holds the name Biplap Dasgupta is someone who is very conscious about his caste and takes pride in it. He considers himself fortunate because he was born into a Brahmin family. He is also one of the lovers of Tilo. In the novel he says, "I loved her without pride. And without hope. Without hope, because I knew that even if by some remote chance she had reciprocated my feelings, my parents, my Brahmin parents, would never accept her – the girl without a past, without a caste – into the family" (Roy, 2017, p.161). However, it was not because of his parents that he hesitated to approach Tilo because after his parents died he got himself married to a Brahmin woman and as he says the following lines it reveals a lot about his inner conscience about his caste. He says, "My wife and I tolerate each other and adorn our children. Chitra – Chittarooma – my wife (yes, my Brahmin wife)" (Roy, 2017, p.161). He is into a loveless marriage, yet takes pride in the fact that he has married a Brahmin wife. However, this man who seems to be so keen about the purity of his culture contradicts himself as he takes pride in his daughters attending French school. This is another characteristics of the postcolonial world. The postcolonial people seem to be keen on holding on to their culture but on the other hand they cannot resist the influence of the European culture. Everything that is western seems to draw them. There is a constant division of the inner state of mind, between western ideology and one's own culture.

Homi Bhabha, in the introduction to his book *The Location of the Culture* quotes Martin Heidegger as, "A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something begins its presenting" (Bhabha, 1994, p.1). According to Bhabha the boundary is the place from which something begins. However, it is only when an individual steps outside this boundary that something new begins. In the novel Anjum leaves the "Duniya" or the real world and moves in to Khwabgah in the hope of

finding her true self. In spite of the fact that Khwabgah gave her the full freedom to be herself she was unsatisfied with the life in Khwabgah. The people in Khwabgah knew that the world outside was cruel and so they had kept themselves aloof from the so called world of the ‘normal’ people. However, Anjum had made up her mind to go beyond the ‘boundary’; and when she did so, she found a beginning of something new. “Only a ten-minute tempo ride from the Khwabgah, once again Anjum entered another world” (Roy, 2017, p.57).

After leaving the Khwabgah, Anjum started living in a graveyard. The graveyard is symbolic of the ruins and after-affect of colonization. It represents the dead culture of the colonized people under the imperialism of the colonizers. The graveyard was not an alien place for Anjum because “several generations of Anjum’s family were buried there – Mulaqat Ali, his father and mother, his grandfather and grandmother” (Roy, 2017, p.56). In was in this ‘third-place’, between Duniya and Khwabgah that Anjum created a new world, a world of her own. Anjum, in spite of her own complex identity, moved forward and totally changed the scenario of the graveyard and gives it a new identity, a hybrid identity. She breathed life into the dead culture of her ancestors and gave a new life to it. “Over time Anjum began to enclose the graves of her relatives and built rooms around them. Each room had a grave (or two) and a bed” (Roy, 2017, p.67). In this way she came up with a new world which she could call it her own, where the bodies and the spirits of her ancestors dwelt and where she was the master of all. She called this world “Jannat Guest House” which meant “Paradise”. This is similar to what Bhabha says about the “third space” that there is a new beginning beyond the ‘boundary’. Anjum tried to create a new identity in this third space. Her attempt of reviving the past can be seen as she builds rooms upon the graveyard and made it into a place of “paradise”, giving it a completely new identity. In a postcolonial sense this can be interpreted as the continuous effort of the colonized people to regain their lost culture. Also it represents intermingling of cultures and how it led to coming up with a new cultural identity. The very fact that in the novel the hijras recall their glorious past shows how the once colonized countries led a free life. Ustad Kulsoom Bi in the novel says, “We are the Hijras of Shahjahanabad. Our Rulers trusted us enough to put their wives and

mothers in our care. Once we roamed freely in their private quarters, the zenana, of the Red Fort. They’re all gone now, those mighty emperors and their queens. But *we* are still here” (Roy, 2017, p.49). This can be interpreted as a reflection of the reminiscence of the life before colonization.

The novel is set against the background of Indo-Pakistan riot and this makes the after-affect of postcolonialism even more vivid. The novel also portrays the complexities of the main characters in being unable to find a place which they could call their own. Like Anjum, Tilottama, one of the major female characters in the novel, is someone without a distinct identity. She is being compared to a “paper boat on a boisterous sea. She was absolutely alone” (Roy, 2017, p.160). She is a mysterious character who according to Naga, one of the characters in the novel, “did not have answers to those ordinary college-kid questions: Where are you from? What does your father do? Et cetera and so on” (Roy, 2017, p.154). The quest for identity and a sense of belongingness is not only prominent in Anjum but is also visible in Tilo and this is another characteristics of postcolonialism. These similarities between the two characters led them to have a strange connection though they had never known each other. Except for the fact that Anjum was a hijra and Tilo, a complete woman, they shared similar experiences. They are both individuals trying to escape the past and were in search of something unknown. As for Anjum, “she tried to un-know what they had done to all the others” (Roy, 2017, p.61). And even for Tilo, “she wondered how to un-know certain things, certain specific things that she knew but did not wish to know” (Roy, 2017, p.258). Though the narrator in the novel interprets the above lines in the context of the events in the novel, there can also be a postcolonial interpretation to this. The characters’ wish to “un-know” or “unlearn” certain things reminds us of Ngugi Wa Thiongo (1986) who talks about “decolonizing the mind”. It portrays the wish of the colonized people to unlearn whatever has been implemented to them by their dominators. However, the question that concerns us here is whether it is possible to “un-know” or “un-learn” whatever have been entrenched in our minds.

Conclusion

... a war that can never be won or lost, a war without end. (Roy, 2017, p. 181)

Hybridity, mimicry and in-betweenness are the progeny of postcolonialism and it seems impossible to “unlearn” what has been implemented on our minds. Like Anjum who lives in the graveyard amongst her ancestors, the once colonized people also live among the ruins of their culture which is no longer pure as it has been intermingled with the culture of the Europeans. The conflict whether to embrace this hybrid culture or to go back and regain their lost culture is a major issue. The quest for one’s identity has always been a major concern in the postcolonial world and the quest seem to be never-ending. In such a scenario the only thing we could do is to hold on and not let our cultural identity be drowned in all these conflicts.

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