

OTHERIZATION AND VIOLENCE AGAINST DALITS AND THE MUSLIMS IN POSTCOLONIAL INDIA: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF NAYANTARA SAHGAL'S *WHEN THE MOON SHINES BY THE DAY* AND ARUNDHATI ROY'S *THE MINISTRY OF UTMOST HAPPINESS*

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Abstract:

This paper undertakes a critical analysis of Nayantara Sahgal's novel *When the Moon Shines by the Day* (2017) and Arundhati Roy's work *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) from the point of view of their depiction of minorities in independent India. Both the works are dystopian satires on the perceived discriminatory and exclusionary policies adopted and pursued by the present day political dispensation allegedly aimed at otherising, marginalizing and dispossessing the minority dalit and the Muslim communities. Through the fictional portrayal of the brutal mob lynchings and violent killings of the members of the dalit and the Muslim communities by the dominant Hindutva elements, both the texts appear to rupture the underbelly of the nationalistic, unitary and emancipatory narratives of democracy, equality and freedom for all in the country. The paper also focuses on how both the texts appear to underscore the need for tolerance, socio-cultural syncretism and peaceful co-existence for the establishment of an all-inclusionary, liberal and a progressive multicultural nation ensuring unity in plurality.

Key-words: Otherization, oppression, violence, postcolonial, liberal, tolerance, intolerance, marginalization, dispossession, discrimination, monolithic, multiculturalism.

For many marginalized and downtrodden sections of the people, the hard earned Indian Independence came as a dream of inclusion in the national project. However, in many cases, the aftermath of the Indian Independence witnessed further degeneration, otherization and exclusion of the subaltern under the monolithic nationalist as well as the far-right radical narratives of unity, modernity and progress. The present paper analyses Nayantara Sahgal's *When the Moon Shines by the Day* (2017) and Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) from the perspective of how the Indian postcolonial

nation state, which was supposed to fulfill the aspirations of the socially, culturally, politically and economically marginalized and alienated sections of the Indian society, has largely failed to improve the lot of such people.

The lack of any visible progressive change in the socio-cultural and economic spheres may be largely attributed to the inheritance and adoption of the oppressive and coercive colonial state machinery which was designed for the purpose of repression and exploitation of the colonial subjects. In this regard, Aijaz Ahmed (1992) observes that in many cases, the decolonisation witnessed the transfer of power “not to revolutionary vanguards but to the national bourgeoisie poised for reintegration into subordinate positions within the imperialist structure” (*In Theory* 28). Thus, the aftermath of the Indian Independence was also “fraught by the anxieties and fears of failure which attend the need to satisfy the historical burden of expectation” (Gandhi 5). Pointing out the lack of political will to bring about any change in the polity and the policies practised in contemporary India, Arundhati Roy (2002) remarks that “[I]ndependence came (and went), elections come and go, but there has been no shuffling of the deck. On the contrary, the old order has been consecrated, the rift fortified” (*The Algebra of Infinite Justice* 50). It is in this backdrop that both Sahgal and Roy appear to build their argument and expose the divisive politics and often violently repressive and coercive state policies governing the dalits and the Muslims. The paper also studies how the postcolonial Indian nation state has come to otherize these people and at times violently trample their human rights, caste and religious identities.

Marginalization and violence stems from identity politics and arbitrary imposition of the notions of stereotypical, unitary identity as the superior self and the inferior other by the powerful dominant groups in the society. Discussing the relationship between violence and the notion of singular identity, Amartya Sen (2006) contends that “[V]iolence is fomented by the imposition of singular and belligerent identities on gullible people, championed by proficient artisans of terror” (*Identity* 02). He also argues in the very introduction to this book that with “suitable instigation, a fostered sense of identity with one group of people can be made into a powerful weapon to brutalize the other” (xv). There can be no denying the fact that the violence perpetrated by the dominant group begets violence as reaction and retaliation. Defining the layered nature of violence, a retired IPS officer, K.S. Subramanian (2007), states that there are three main categories of violence. While many analysts are chiefly concerned with the physical violence which remains the visible and physical manifestation of violence, there are other types of violence also, such as structural and symbolic. Subramanian argues that the structural violence “occurs when the oppressed are materially and socially controlled or excluded by the state, market and civil society” (*Political Violence* 35). Symbolic violence happens when “the oppressed are culturally stigmatized and ideologically regulated or marginalized. Symbolic violence is used by the state and the cultural mainstream to perpetuate their hegemony” (35). After a careful examination of the socio-cultural deracination of the dalit and Muslim communities in the contemporary India, it can be argued that dalits and Muslims in contemporary India are the victims of overt physical violence as well as structural and symbolic violence.

Historically, dalits and tribal peoples in India have always been the stigmatized and dispossessed sections of the Indian society. Dalit is a self-applied term for the community of people called the untouchables and others who were deprived of any status in the fold of traditional Hindu caste system. In the Indian caste system the “lowest strata of the caste system have been referred to as ‘untouchables’, because they are excluded from the performance of rituals which confer religious purity. The caste system is an illustration of social closure in which access to wealth and prestige is closed to social groups which are excluded from the performance of purifying rituals” (*Dictionary of Sociology* 22). The untouchables have been subjected to the discriminatory and dehumanizing socio-religious practices throughout the ages and have been deprived of even basic human rights. Roy deconstructs untouchability in her Booker Prize winning work, *The God of Small Things*, which deals with the unjust and malicious treatment meted out to its dalit protagonist Velutha and the other characters of his caste. She highlights that the untouchables in Kerala, one of the most literate states of India and socially dominated by the Syrian Christians and Brahmins, were not allowed “into the houses” of the high castes and not allowed to “touch anything that Touchables touched” (*God of Small Things* 73). They were also mandated to “crawl backward with a broom, sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Parvan’s footprint” (73-74). Roy states that such dehumanizing and discriminatory treatment of the untouchables inhibit them from realizing their potential. She further remarks that the highly talented protagonist of the novel, Velutha “might have become an engineer” (77), had he not been a Parvan.

Roy also explores the discriminatory and dehumanizing nature of the caste system in her *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* from various perspectives. While portraying the cruel and inhuman aspects of the caste system, she depicts how the untouchables have been oppressed and subjected to the inhuman treatment by the upper castes in India since the inception of *Manusmriti* which institutionalized the rigid system of social stratification prevailing at the that time. In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Saddam Hussain, who was born a dalit has converted to Islam and changed his name from Dayachand to Saddam Hussain by way of protest after the mob lynching and brutal killing of his father by the mob of vigilantes. Narrating his painful story, Saddam Hussain reveals how his father was arrested “on the charge of “cow slaughter”” (*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 88) after failing to offer a bribe to the police inspector, who demanded it, while they were transporting the carcass of a dead cow. He discloses that taking advantage of the vicious political and religious situation, the police officer informed the vigilante miscreants about the arrest, who chanted *Jai Shri Ram!* And *Vande Mataram!* slogans, dragged Saddam’s father out of the police station and brutalized him with crowbars and carjacks. Saddam also reveals that after killing his father, the perpetrators of violence left in their cars splashing “through puddles of his father’s blood” (89).

Roy also portrays another painful aspect of intolerance, hatred and the dispossession of the untouchables. She shows that the caste discrimination is prevalent even in the armed forces. She reveals that a dalit soldier, S. Murugesan was discriminated against in the army when he was alive and after his death; his dead body would not be allowed to be carried past through the houses of the upper caste Hindus

in his village and had to be carried to the “. . . Untouchables’ cremation ground right next to the village dump” (317). The cement statue that the authorities erected in his honour was mutilated and destroyed within a month as the upper castes in the village could not tolerate the statue of an untouchable at the entrance of the village. Even the police authorities refuse to lodge a police complaint against this disfiguration of the statue on the pretext of low grade material having been used for its construction. Thus, the text highlights the plight and the inhuman treatment that the untouchables have to undergo even in the Independent India. The societal pressures naturalize the injustice to them and they accept their own inferior identity.

Moving on to *When the Moon Shines by the Day* by Nayantara Sahgal, this text also depicts a brutal mob lynching and killing of an untouchable, Suraj. Some vigilante youth brutalize and violently murder Suraj under the suspicion of carrying a suitcase made of cowhide. While witnessing this brutal murder, Rehana, the central character in the text, falls down on her knees, feeling the “terror of being encircled by weapons poised to strike, the helplessness of skin and spine against the savagery to come” and feels that the “Sanatan dharma had been slaughtered in cold blood this night” (*When the Moon Shines by the Day* 141-142). Thus, both Sahgal and Roy offer a fictionalised representation of actual recent incidents and bring to mind the horrific Dadri mob lynching of Mohammad Akhlaq in 2015 on the suspicion of “eating beef” (*The Hindu* 2019) and of Pehlu Khan and his sons in 2017 on the suspicion of “cow smuggling” (*India Today* 2019). Such harrowing incidents appear to have agitated both the writers and prompted them to paint them with all the gruesome details in their texts.

Muslims on the other hand, have always been considered as the other both before and after the independence. The alienation and the hatred fostered by the coloniser culminated into partition and Hindu-Muslim riots in the wake of the Indian Independence. The hatred and intolerance between the Hindus and the Muslims for each other was such at the time of partition that millions of Hindus and Muslims were violently killed in Hindu-Muslim riots. Recollecting the Hindu-Muslim riots after the partition, Amartya Sen wonders at the “speed with which”, the broad minded “human beings of January were suddenly transformed into the ruthless Hindus and fierce Muslims of July. Hundreds of thousands perished at the hands of people who, led by the commanders of carnage, killed others on behalf of their “own people”” (*Identity* 02). Reflecting on the violence in the wake of Indian partition, Roy observes “God’s carotid burst open on a new border between India and Pakistan and a million people died of hatred. Neighbours turned on each other as though they’d never known each other . . .” (*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 13).

The process of otherization of the Muslims only gained momentum after the independence with the rise of the far right Hindutva elements in the Indian politics and society and the politicisation of religion. Amartya Sen argues that “the politicization of religion” (*Identity* 71) and a “simplistic characterization of India along an artificially singular religious line remains politically explosive” (48-49). Portraying the Gujarat riots and the Muslim genocide, Roy presents a harrowing picture of the Muslim genocide in Gujarat in her *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, which was allegedly abetted by the powers that be. Subramanian notes in his *Political Violence and the Police in India* (2007), that the “speed with which the violence spread and its intensity and brutality suggested that it could not have happened without

government support” (176). Describing the Gujarat riots, Roy narrates how Anjum, the central character in the text *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, along with Zakir Mian is caught up in the orgy of violence and Muslim genocide when he was on a visit to Ahmedabad. Zakir Mian is brutally killed by the violent mob and Roy unveils how they “folded the men and unfolded the women. And how eventually they had pulled them apart limb from limb and set them on fire” (*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. 61-62) while chanting “*Mussalman ka ek hi sthan! Qabristan ya Pakistan! Only one place for the Mussalman! The Graveyard or Pakistan!*” (62). Anjum barely escapes a violent death due to her being a transgender, who is considered to bring bad luck if killed. Anjum always remembers her miraculous escape as “Butcher’s Luck” (63) since she was spared just due to her perceived legendary abilities to bring good luck to the butchers. The psychological trauma that Anjum undergoes during the communal violence leaves a permanent scar on her psyche which she remains unable to forget thereafter.

Sahgal also portrays similar incidents of alienation, segregation and violent killings of the Muslims in the Muslim ghetto in her text *When the Moon Shines by the Day*. Rehana’s domestic help Abdul has to change his identity and name to Morari Lal as a strategy of survival since the “Mussalmans were now regarded as outsiders who must wear a badge and live in a far-off settlement . . . so it was better to be Morari Lal” (*When the Moon Shines by the Day*. 35-36). She narrates that the Muslim artists and intellectuals are violently segregated from the Hindu society and forced to live in a ghetto away from the Hindu population in order to avoid cultural and racial contamination. Depicting another tale of brutality, rape, murder and violence, Sahgal depicts a heart rending brutalised image of the Muslim ghetto with “naked buttocks branded with a swastika. Another branded Om across torn breasts . . . a pregnant belly had been sliced open, the pulp that had been a foetus plucked out and tossed aside. Legs lay wrenched apart, metal rods inserted. Smoke was rising from the smouldering flesh of a neatly constructed human pyramid . . . Fires raged among the ruins . . .” (149-150). Thus, both the writers appear to offer a representation of the violent treatment of the otherized Muslim community in contemporary India.

The above discussion reveals that both the texts, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* and *When the Moon Shines by the Day* are dystopian satires on the prevalent socio-cultural and political conditions in the contemporary Indian society, and depict the marginalisation and violent dispossession of the dalits and the Muslims. Mourning the exclusionary and intolerant policies of the present day political set up, both the texts appear to plead for tolerance, socio-cultural syncretism and multiculturalism which the founding fathers of the Indian nation dreamed of while drafting the Indian Constitution. However, there can be no denying the fact that a literary work, essentially having aesthetic and fictional attributes, also remains a social document reflecting contemporary socio-cultural conditions prevalent in the society. Although, literature cannot be equated with history in the strictest sense, which presents bare facts while claiming to be objective, literary freedom, on the other hand, allows a writer to present his or her worldview in aesthetically realistic terms. Thus, both the texts can be said to be meticulous efforts of their respective writers to offer a peep into the present day conditions through the prism of fiction and appear to call for maintaining a fine balance among the diverse communities for peaceful co-existence and for achieving a progressive and all-inclusive peaceful nation.

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