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

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ABSTRACT

The idea of representation is central to the novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness.* The phenomenon of naming and categorizing things which is common in all cultures is predicted on the notion of binary opposites. That which does not fall into either of the categories is labelled as queer. In her novel, Arundhati Roy gives representation to the queer, the transgenders, the marginalised and the subalterns, drawn from diverse sections of Indian society. She has woven the idioms of the intelligible into the narrative of the novel as a linguistic, cultural and political category with primary focus on the portrayal of non-normative gender identities in her work. This paper attempts to mark the way in which the novel critically engages with the questions of language embodiment and subjectivity by sketching unintelligibility as a site which is constructed as incomprehensible by the normative frames of legibility on one side, and as a site of potential resistance on the other.

Keywords- Transgenders, marginalised, Arundhati Roy , gender identities , potential resistance

1 INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of naming things and categorizing them is common in all cultures and societies. The labelling technique, that is, the dexterous use of descriptive words and phrases to identify persons, groups, movements or theories is related to this common phenomenon. In this labelling technique there are only binary opposites and that which does not fall into either of the two categories can only be called a defect, an anomaly or rather just queer. The beginning of this category called queer can be traced back to the essential need of the society to categorise and label everything into the binaries familiar to it. Any sort of deviation from the norm was considered dangerous because it was subversive to the system of the beliefs on which society was based. Consequently, the marginalised minority is always kept unrepresented by the hegemonic institution of the society. Roy's work emerges at a significant turn in the critical self-consciousness of Indian society to engage with the vital questions of history and reality, the society grapples with.

2 OBJECTIVES

This paper is an attempt to explore how Roy's critical engagement in the novel works through the motif of unintelligibility. Unintelligibility is understood in this study as that which defies the norms of the intelligible or "the

general historical schema or schemas that establish the domains of the knowable" (Butler 6). Through this motif of unintelligibility, the novelist weaves the fabric of the story to portray non-normative gender identities in order to represent the unrepresented gender against the broader context of political unintelligibility which preoccupies the history and present of Indian society.

3 LITERATURE REVIEW

Nilanjana S. Roy writes, "At its best, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* can be miraculous, in its ability to evoke a thousand small acts of tenderness, and everyday pleasures. These are often all that people who are not warriors by nature have as weapons to defend themselves against a time of brutal certainties and raising rage. For all her dark materials, Ministry ends on a note of hope: you can almost believe that things might turn out all right in the end. Almost."

Rashid J. Ahmed reviews, "Arundhati writes that the apparently normal conditions in our society are in fact, a soft and fragile state of affairs. Similar to a white membrane hiding the fertility of the cancer in the center, this peaceful state is hiding extremism and narrow mindedness at its base. The novel has been painted with expertise and elegance, keeping India`s religious, political, social, economic, and geographical life on a magnanimous canvas.

4 METHODOLOGY

This article applies Feminism, Trauma Studies, Memory Studies and Psychoanalysis to find out the root cause of the different behavioral pattern in the novel. It also focuses on the impact of childhood trauma in the formation of self.

5. DISCUSSION

The novel redefines the idea of representation. It tells the story of estranged souls who do not fit into the system due to non-normative sexual identity. The story revolves around a transgender woman, Anjum, who spent her childhood as Aftab until one day she saw a hijra walking along the streets of her town and decided to be like her even though she did not know at that time what it meant. Anjum leaves the house she was born in and moves to khwabgah, which literally means the house of dreams: The Khwabgah was called Khwabgah, Ustad Kulsoom Bi said, because it was where special people, blessed people, came with their dreams that could not be realized in the Duniya. (53)

Roy's work suggests the coexistence of two "universes", each of which is a realm of legibility of its own, with distinctly established frames of coherence through which one can make sense of the world and one's position in it. The coexistence of these metaphoric realms of legibility parallels the opposition drawn in the novel between the "duniya" – the normative world of the people – on one hand, and the more ambiguous, impalpable spaces of existence occupied by the characters of non-normative gender identities, who function outside the frames of legibility of the World (Roy 24).

In this novel, we come across such characters whose acts of comprehending and making sense of the World ensue primarily from cultural specific language and references which are available to the speakers of a language. Anjum's father, for instance, "could produce a couplet from his formidable repertoire that was eerily apt for … every

occasion …This habit … infused everything with a subtle sense of stagnancy, a sense that everything that happened had happened before. That it had already been written, sung, commented upon and entered into history's inventory. That nothing new was possible." (Roy 15-16)

In the Urdu-speaking life-worlds where the novel is set, the language and its cultural frames of reference is shown to be what renders legibility to the experiences of individuals. In such a realm of linguistic coherence, what is unintelligible to the legibility of the mainstream World becomes expressed only as a linguistic impossibility. On encountering Anjum's hermaphrodite body, her mother cannot seem to make sense of what she is faced with, "In Urdu, the only language she knew, all things … had a gender. Everything was either masculine or feminine, … Everything except her baby … there was a word for those like him – Hijra. Two words actually, Hijra and Kinnar. But two words do not make a language. Was it possible to live outside language?" (Roy 8)

The protagonist of the novel, Anjum, also fails to locate herself within the linguistic frame of legibility by which the normative World operates. Her ambiguous social position places her squarely outside the language. The culturally unintelligible space which Anjum occupies is also difficult for his parents to comprehend. Her father is left with "no suitable couplet for the occasion" (16). The question of her liability puts her mother in a chaotic silence of incomprehensibility: one that "did not address itself to her in words, or as a single lucid sentence", but "as a soundless, embryonic howl" (Roy 8).

Apart from this, the very first chapter has a suggestive title, 'Where do old birds go to die?' which raises intriguing question, "Where do old birds go to die? Do they fall on us like stones from the sky? Do we stumble on their bodies in the streets? (5)

The context of this question is the Imam asking Anjum what happens to people like her when they die. Who bathes their dead bodies and where they are buried? Anjum retorts angrily but her words foreshadow the later function of the establishment that Anjum built in the graveyard which she calls her home. Jannat Guest House, apart from housing the lowly and the abandoned, also functioned as a funeral parlour for those who could not avail of the services offered to most people because they were shunned from the Duniya. They were the subalterns belonging to the lowest rung of the so-called non-existent class hierarchy and those who could not expect the grace given to a dead body, as they cannot escape categorization even in death. As the narrator comments, "The one clear criterion was that Jannat Funeral Services would only bury those whom the graveyards and imams of the Duniya had rejected" (80). The Duniya is a concept that the inhabitants of the Khwabgah cherish about the real unforgiving world outside of their safe haven. It is a world that has no place for people like them – hermaphrodites, men wanting to be women and women wanting to be men. They couldn't be labelled, or accommodated into the system and hence shouldn't be a part of the world. Hence, they created a niche for themselves in the old house they called the Khwabgah and watched the Duniya from their niche, trying to understand it and constantly trying to carve a space for themselves outside Duniya. Even the establishment of the Jannat Guest House, where Anjum goes after getting fed up with the Khwabgah is an extension of this niche, a self-created forte where she could finally live without constraints and rules and more importantly find representation as the owner of the space.

This is spoken by Nimmo Gorakhpuri a friend of Anjum, who explains to her why the ill-fated beings of the Khwabgah can never be truly happy in spite of the warmth they receive from that establishment. The naïve Anjum, whose happiness knows no bounds because she is finally freed from the constraints of being Aftab, thinks that the Khwabgah is the realisation of her dreams. However, she soon realises that they are nothing but Khushi-khors, the vultures who live upon other people's happiness and bless them or curse them (with a show of their mutilated privates) depending upon the amount they manage to scavenge from people of the Duniya. Nimmo seems to voice the inner turmoil of the unlabelled who can never really be at peace because of the riot inside them, the riot of not belonging to any one of the two established categories. She also says that they were created as an experiment by the Almighty, who in his boredom tried to create beings who would be incapable of happiness. Nevertheless, they do have small joys of their own which were practically invisible to the labelled eyes.

The unintelligibility of non-binary bodies is not something that excludes the very subjects who inhabit these bodies. Conditioned in the heteronormative frames of cultural reference and legibility at least in the childhood, navigating what is represented as the unintelligibility of one's own body is a complex task for the transpersons in the novel. Seeking out oneself in the stories told by others, and telling stories about themselves emerges as one tactic through which the characters in the novel try to extend legitimacy to their perceived unintelligibility. For an older generation of transpersons, this manifests as seeking their presence in the written stories and histories author(iz)ed by the frames of legitimacy of the normative World. Ustad Kulsoom Bi, the elderly transwoman who seeks the presence of the transgender in a government-approved, narrativizes version of history is an instance of this, suddenly, admits those soft, happy, lady-sounds would come the clearly audible, deep, distinct, rasping, coquettish giggle of a court eunuch. 'There!' … That is us … That is our ancestry, our history, our story.' … What mattered was that it existed. To be present in history, even as nothing more than a chuckle, was a universe away from being absent from it, from being written out of it altogether. (51)

The ways in which Anjum, the protagonist of the novel, attempts to navigate the perceived unintelligibility of her position is different. For the rest of the transpersons in the story, finding one's place in existing narrations or articulating narrations of one's own become the tactics of navigating the unintelligible, but this is not always the case with Anjum. Even when she attempts to narrate herself, the unsayable remains at the fringes of her narration, defying resolution and comprehension. For her daughter Zainab, Anum tries to "rewrite a simple, happier life for herself" through the act of narration (34). However, the incomprehensible remains in what is left unarticulated, edited out: "True, it was only a routine bit of humiliation for Hijras, nothing out of the ordinary … It was nothing, but still, it was something" (35). Apart from this, when it comes to constitute the perceived unintelligibility in her, Anjum turns her subject-position into one which subverts the neat divisibility of heteronormative narratives, "Long ago a man who knew English told her that her name written backwards (in English) spelled Majnu. … 'You mean I've made a khichdi of their story?'" (4)

In the novel, often, such a resistance to intelligibility emerges as a disavowal to know oneself as a distinct subject, 'I'm all of them, I'm Roomi and Juli, I'm Laila and Majnu. And Mujna, why not? Who says my name is Anjum?

I'm not Anjum, I'm Anjuman. I'm a mehfil, I'm a gathering. Of everybody and nobody, of everything and nothing. Is there anyone else you would like to invite? Everyone's invited.'(4)

Through such expression, the protagonist of the novel uses language to register the cultural unintelligibility in a very effective manner. Jannat Guest House becomes home to all those who had never felt at home before. In the narrow confines of the space that they shared with the dead, the living and the living-dead, they found representation for themselves. It became the space where no questions would be asked and no labels would be required, one had only to be outside the system of the Duniya to be a part of the Guest House. And indeed, to tell a shattered story one needs to become everything because the term everybody is a delimiting one. Arundhati Roy has expertly rendered to the world a shattered story and in the process she has become everything. The story states, "How to tell a shattered story? By slowly becoming everybody. No, by slowly becoming everything" (436).

6. THEMATIC ANALYSIS

The unprivileged characters in the imaginary world of the novel— which includes not just the gender minorities, but also victimsof anti-caste violence, religious fundamentalism and state-sponsored conflict— can be understood only in terms of this broader notion of a political unintelligibility. This novel also tries hard to expose and question constitutive social norm.

7. COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

The un-apprehensible, un-recognizable and unintelligible subject of the gender minorities of the society is used as a metaphor to launch this broader critique on the norms and frames that construct particular lives and subjectivities as politically unintelligible.

Judith Butler writes:, "[S]pecific lives cannot be apprehendedas injured or lost if they are not first apprehended as living. If certain lives do not qualify as lives or are, from the start, not conceivable as lives within certain epistemological frames, then these lives are never lived nor lost in the full sense."(1)

This un-apprehensibility of particular lives closely figures within the notions of recognizability and intelligibility: "there are 'subjects, who are not quite recognizable as subjects', and there are 'lives, that are not quite-or, indeed, are never-recognized as lives'"(Butler4). In other words, "a life has to be intelligibleas a life, has to conform to certain conceptions of what life is, in order to become recognizable"(Butler7).

8. MAJOR FINDINGS

Language plays an important role in shaping one's identity as a medium of representation. However, language has always followed the system of labelling and hence a baby, merely a day old, falls through the crack in the system because it cannot be categorised as male or female. Admittedly, there are words to 'name' cases as that of Aftab-Anjum. However, such words, (hermaphrodite, transgender, bisexual, asexual) carry with them a taboo that destroys their identity. There are regional equivalents and colloquial usages that only serve to further insult and to drive these disadvantaged persons to the brink of society where they are required to live out their unfortunate lives without in any way disturbing the status quo, "It was an experiment. He decided to create something, a living creature that is

incapable of happiness. So, he made us … The riot is inside us, the war is inside us, Indo-Pak is inside us. It will never settle down It can't" (23).

This representation is not like the giggle of the eunuch in the pages of history; it is a journey through the minds of the unlabelled, their frustrations, misery, resistance and gleams of hope, expressed in a masterly narrative which will remain as a form of historical representation of the lowly, the stigmatized and the doubly condemned.

9. CONCLUSION

Thus, The Ministry of Utmost Happiness critically engages with the questions of language, embodiment and subjectivity by sketching unintelligibility as a site which is constructed as incomprehensible by the normative frames of legibility on one hand, and as a site of potential resistance on the other.

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