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Subaltern Agencies: An Intersectional Reading of Resistance in Arundhati Roy's Select Novels

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the multifaceted nature of defiance within Arundhati Roy's fictional works, "The God of Small Things" and "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness". Through centering the experiences of disenfranchised figures, Roy offers a sharp interrogation of institutional oppression, casteism, and state-sanctioned brutality. Although current literary criticism extensively details the subjugation and vulnerability of subaltern women trapped by patriarchal norms, social hierarchies, political dynamics, and religious dogmas, this inquiry focuses on their active agency against these systemic grievances. Drawing upon the theoretical insights of Guha, Spivak, Gramsci, and Crenshaw, this analysis maps the intersectional links between private rebellion and public activism. It highlights Roy's deconstruction of dominant power hierarchies alongside her pursuit of equity and human rights. Ultimately, the investigation uncovers the intricate tiers of opposition embedded in Roy's distinctive framing of diverse oppositional methods throughout her prose.

Keys words: Resistance, Violence, Injustices, Subaltern Consciousness, Political Resistance, Gender and Identity

INTRODUCTION

Arundhati Roy's fiction is profoundly embedded in the socio-political realities of modern India. Beyond her prominent political and intellectual activism, novels such as "***The God of Small Things***" and "***The Ministry of Utmost Happiness***" center on marginalized individuals, especially women. This narrative focus mirrors Gayatri Chakrabarti Spivak's emphasis on subaltern classes within nationalist history, which actively resists elitist biases in historical records (1998: 445). Within "***The God of Small Things***", characters like Ammu and Rahel directly confront patriarchal frameworks. Ammu flouts societal conventions by entering an inter-caste marriage and, subsequently, a taboo inter-caste affair. Similarly, Rahel dismisses traditional gender expectations, navigating an unconventional path for women of her era.

Roy's "***The Ministry of Utmost Happiness***" further illustrates the victimization and resilience of subaltern women, weaving in historical events spanning from the Partition to the early 21st century. The majority of the novel's marginalized female figures combat injustice by challenging and dismantling social, political, and cultural dogmas to forge an inclusive space of collective joy. For example, Anjum, rejected by her family and community for being intersex, renounces prescribed gender binaries and builds a sanctuary for society's outcasts. Meanwhile, Tilotama risks everything for the liberation of Kashmiri women, and Revathy struggles alongside exploited working-class women for their freedom.

This study explores how subaltern women confront systemic injustice within Arundhati Roy's selected

fiction, and how their methods of defiance diverge. Through "***The God of Small Things***" and "***The Ministry of Utmost Happiness***", Roy dramatizes the devastating realities facing marginalized, victimized, and exploited women trapped under India's deeply entrenched social, cultural, religious, and political hierarchies. To combat these multi-layered inequities, these disenfranchised female characters question and openly rebel against dominant societal paradigms. Crucially, however, their modes of resistance vary significantly between the two works. Ultimately, Roy's novels offer distinct portrayals of subaltern female rebellion, each uniquely shaped by the specific socio-political and chronological frameworks of contemporary India.

Literature Review

Arundhati Roy's fiction investigates profound themes such as caste, gender, identity, and socio-political oppression. The narratives of "***The God of Small Things"*** [1] and "***The Ministry of Utmost Happiness"*** [2] dissect India's contemporary realities, cementing her standing within global literary critique. Researchers have extensively examined these texts for their sophisticated structural strategies, environmental commentary, postcolonial frameworks, and intersectional investigations of systemic power.

Scholars like Nair [3] emphasize the depiction of caste-based subjugation, specifically via the tragic romance between Ammu and Velutha, an untouchable Paravan. Nair posits that Roy disrupts rigid caste stratifications by humanizing figures excluded by orthodox conventions. Correspondingly, Chacko [4] observes how Roy condemns patriarchal systems through Ammu's suffering under gendered constraints. The prose's nonlinear arrangement and fractured timeline have also generated significant interest. Banerjee [5] argues that these stylistic choices mirror the shattered lives of the protagonists and their efforts to balance private trauma with public history. Additionally, D'Cruz [6] highlights the integration of intimate and national histories, asserting that Roy's postcolonial Kerala serves as a microcosm for India's broader socio-political fractures.

Roy's second novel broadens her thematic canvas to encompass state nationalism, ecological decay, and religious extremism. Ahmed [7] maintains that the text's web of overlapping narratives reflects the intersecting nature of socio-political struggles across modern India. The characterization of Anjum, a trans woman who builds a refuge for societal outcasts, serves as a focal point for scholars like Sharma They argue that Roy reconstructs the concept of solidarity and defiance against structural .[8] subjugation.

Religious extremism stands out as a central motif, with research demonstrating how the Hindu nationalist paradigm disenfranchises minority populations. Iyer, for instance, notes how Roy exposes the persecution of religious minorities during defining crises like the Gujarat violence and the Kashmir insurgency. Correspondingly, Maerhofer demonstrates that Roy condemns India's majoritarian state for suppressing Muslim liberties to build a Hindu nation-state. Furthermore, Joshi [9] contends that Roy's depictions of sectarian brutality and state-backed violence destabilize orthodox nationalistic rhetoric, providing a crucial counter-narrative that amplifies marginalized perspectives.

Although Roy's depiction of disenfranchised women exposes their subjugation, several analyses indicate that these figures transcend passive victimhood. Gopinath [10] views Roy's female protagonists as non-conformist agents who actively breach societal limitations. As Islam observes, "**Roy's novel starts and ends in the same graveyard, which becomes a heaven for human beings and animals that are connected together**" (p. 37). This particular setting serves to emblemize the unraveling of gender hierarchies within Roy's broader assault on patriarchy. While such critiques reinforce the notion that her characters channel an awakening to structural inequity, they frequently overlook the shifting

trajectories of subaltern female defiance amid India's transforming socio-political environment.
Scholarship on Roy's fiction consequently clarifies the multi-tiered oppression endured by subaltern women, yet remains disproportionately focused on subjugation over agency. This study extends current academic conversations by evaluating how marginalized women directly challenge systemic tyranny, offering a more intricate perspective on resistance among India's outcasts..

Methodology

Antonio Gramsci originally coined the term "**subaltern**" to identify disenfranchised, working-class populations. He asserted that these individuals lacked genuine agency, leaving them subject to external socio-political dominance. Because their societal contributions were ignored and their experiences minimized, Gramsci characterized subaltern history as "**necessarily fragmented and episodic**" [11]. He further noted that these marginalized populations are constantly navigating pressures from "**the hegemonic group or other subaltern groups**". For Gramsci, hegemony relies on structural and ideological mechanisms to sustain authority, a dynamic that ultimately co-opts the oppressed into consenting to their own subjugation by the ruling class.
In "***Prison Notebooks"***, Gramsci detailed "**hegemony**" as a form of cultural stewardship and ideological control, while simultaneously introducing "**counter-hegemony**" — an oppositional framework designed to challenge institutionalized dominance. Counter-hegemony represents a deliberate rebellion where subaltern groups dismantle elite ideologies to contest entrenched political and economic power structures. This matches "**the way people develop ideas and discourse to challenge dominant assumptions, beliefs and established patterns of behavior**", offering a vital pathway for marginalized individuals to identify and disrupt systemic oppression.
Counter-hegemonic resistance emerges when disenfranchised populations recognize their oppression, combat systematic exclusion, and rescind their compliance with dominant structures [12]. Gramscian theory effectively illuminates character dynamics in fiction, notably within Arundhati Roy's novels, where female figures resist subjugation through explicit counter-hegemonic actions against tyranny. By fracturing hegemonic control, subaltern individuals interrogate societal arrangements and conceptualize alternative frameworks, dismantling prevailing ideological and political systems to permanently reject institutionalized domination[13] [14].
A crucial catalyst in this transformative trajectory is the "**organic intellectual**," who builds critical consciousness and organizes subaltern groups, frequently facing immense personal vulnerability. Gramsci posited that when marginalized communities understand their subordinate status, they can actively pursue an egalitarian, cohesive social order. They foster a "critical self-consciousness which will enable them to overthrow the existing order and develop a morally integrated society" [15]. Addressing these overlapping vectors of subjugation, Kimberlé Crenshaw examines racial and gender intersectionality, noting: "**Because of their intersectional identity as both women and people of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one or the other, the interests and experiences of women of color are frequently marginalized within both**" [16].

Results and Discussion

Roy illustrates subaltern women's defiance of systemic inequalities across "***The God of Small Things"*** and "***The Ministry of Utmost Happiness"***. Applying lenses from Subaltern Studies and gender intersectionality formulated by Guha, Spivak, Gramsci, and Crenshaw, this chapter investigates how Roy's protagonists manifest diverse modes of rebellion against institutionalized tyranny. The inquiry concentrates on Ammu and Rahel in "***The God of Small Things"***, alongside Anjum, Tilotama, and

Revathy in "***The Ministry of Utmost Happiness***", demonstrating how Roy's depiction of subaltern agency shifts across these distinct figures.

Roy's fiction forcefully unmasks the overarching structures that entrench societal dominance. Within ***The God of Small Things***", caste stratifications dictate daily life through the devastating fate of " Velutha, an untouchable Paravan who violates ancestral boundaries. This caste-based violence operates both physically and psychologically, forcing individuals to internalize their enforced positions. For example, Ammu's battle with patriarchy is exacerbated by her social exile as a divorced woman. Her relationship with Velutha operates as a radical revolt, which a bigoted, patriarchal establishment brutally crushes. Correspondingly, Roy addresses systemic gendered oppression in "***The Ministry of Utmost Happiness***". Anjum, a hijra, suffers under the institutional alienation experienced by gender minorities within an inflexible binary framework. Concurrently, escalating sectarian brutality — epitomized by the Gujarat pogroms — demonstrates how majoritarian dominance is enforced via state systems and public passivity, while Tilotama's exposure to geopolitical warfare exemplifies the intersectional geometry of modern subjugation.

Ammu's arc in "***The God of Small Things***" captures the multifaceted subjugation of a subaltern woman inside an affluent Syrian Christian household in Kerala, India. Though systematically marginalized by her gender, Ammu manifests agency by actively flouting the conventions championed by her domestic and social circles. For example, she is barred from higher education because her father, Pappachi, deems it "**an unnecessary expense for a girl**" [17]. Pappachi's dismissive worldview epitomizes the androcentric cultural framework designed to stifle female potential. As Spivak [18] argues, patriarchal dictates routinely curtail female mobility and stifle self-determination. This forced deprivation of schooling highlights how subaltern women confront gendered bias even within the ostensible security of home. Yet, Ammu's pushback, while subtle, crystallizes through her stubborn refusal to conform.

To escape this suffocating environment, Ammu relocates to Kolkata under her aunt's roof, where she selects her own spouse — directly subverting familial and communal protocols. Marrying outside her community through an inter-caste, inter-religious marriage violates the foundational tenets of Syrian Christian orthodoxy, a desperation Roy underscores: "**Ammu met her future husband... she thought that anything, anyone at all, would be better than returning to Ayemenem**". This decision represents an outright rejection of institutionalized traditions, channeling Gramsci's concept of counter-hegemony by dismantling prevailing cultural dogmas As Guha [19] notes, subaltern awareness awakens when individuals identify their subordination and defy oppression; Ammu embodies this awakening, reclaiming her autonomy to fracture the hegemonic constructs surrounding her.

Furthermore, Ammu's encounter with domestic abuse highlights her ongoing vulnerability within an androcentric framework. Her alcoholic spouse inflicts physical violence upon her and attempts to commodify her to appease his manager, Mr. Hollick. As Roy writes, "**Mr. Hollick proposed that Babà go away for a while. For a holiday... Ammu be sent to his bungalow to be looked after**". This marital cruelty mirrors the structural violence subaltern women face behind closed doors, fueled by chauvinistic expectations. This corresponds with research by Islam [20][21], who note that women are routinely targeted by domestic patriarchal violence. Nevertheless, Ammu opposes this exploitation by abandoning her husband, violating the societal mandates that demand her compliance and subordination. This rebellion exemplifies Gramsci's theory of counter-hegemony by actively upending the gendered hierarchy to demand personal sovereignty.

Upon returning to Ayemenem, Ammu encounters intense alienation within her household, where her position as a divorcee raising inter-caste offspring marks her as an outcast. Her aunt, Baby Kochamma,

projects these cultural prejudices, viewing Ammu's twins as "**Half-Hindu Hybrids whom no self-respecting Syrian Christian would ever marry**". Re-entering her ancestral home under these conditions compounds her systemic erasure. As Spivak [22] observes, patriarchal frameworks neutralize women by invalidating their perspectives; Ammu's familial degradation exposes this structural silencing. Even so, Ammu withstands these collective limitations by dismissing the attached dishonor, preserving her autonomy through quiet but profound defiance.

Beyond familial and social prejudice, Ammu experiences deliberate economic disenfranchisement. Despite her active labor in the family business, her brother Chacko asserts total control over the estate, illustrating an androcentric bias. Roy highlights this disparity through Chacko's dismissive claim: **What's yours is mine, and what's mine is also mine"**. Materially stripping Ammu of her inheritance **"** mirrors institutional systems designed to ensure women's financial subordination. As Casey [23] notes, systemic economic deprivation continually entrenches female marginalization. By interrogating her brother's dominance and refusing to tolerate this fiscal erasure, Ammu demonstrates Gramscian subaltern resistance, driven by a critical consciousness that rejects entrenched gendered roles. Her insistence on financial fairness underscores her recognition of economic inequality and her subsequent refusal to comply with it.

Ammu's forbidden intimacy with Velutha, an untouchable Paravan, serves as the ultimate subversion of the dominant social order. Traditional Indian society heavily penalizes inter-caste unions, particularly those crossing the line of untouchability. Well aware of the catastrophic costs, Ammu pursues a relationship with Velutha, whom Roy identifies as occupying "**the lowest hierarchy of the Indian rigid caste system**". Through this bond, Ammu shatters the strict sectarian boundaries enforced by both orthodox Hindu and Syrian Christian hierarchies. Her revolt reflects Guha's [24] reading of caste as an apparatus for suppressing subaltern populations. Ammu's deliberate choice to embrace this relationship operates as a radical manifestation of counter-hegemony, rejecting the entire casteist infrastructure that preserves social division.

The degradation Ammu suffers from law enforcement further cements her subaltern position. When she attempts to defend Velutha, Inspector Thomas Mathew brutally objectifies her, as Roy details: **Inspector Thomas Mathew came around his desk and approached Ammu with his baton... " tapped her breasts with his baton. Gently. Tap tap"** This chilling encounter illustrates Spivak's argument that the subaltern condition is fundamentally gendered, leaving women uniquely vulnerable to institutional abuse [25]. Ammu's decision to withhold a verbal response, channeling her fury into a silent gaze, operates as a profound mode of nonverbal defiance. Her silence stands as an assertion of bodily autonomy against state-sanctioned patriarchal power, revealing a sharp, protective understanding of her place within the socio-political hierarchy.

Furthermore, Roy uses Ammu's character to express a deeply skeptical view of human connections, forged through a lifetime of systemic abandonment. Discussing Julius Caesar's betrayal by Brutus with her twins, she warns them: "**You can't trust anybody, mother, father, brother, husband, best friend, and nobody**". This pervasive cynicism mirrors the profound psychological toll of her isolation and the complete failure of her domestic safety nets. Spivak notes that subaltern subjects develop specialized, adaptive survival mechanisms to navigate institutional hostility; likewise, Ammu's worldview is hardened by trauma. Her warning serves as a defensive shield, using emotional detachment to safeguard her children from inevitable structural betrayal.

Ammu's daughter, Rahel, experiences systemic alienation primarily inherited from her parentage as the offspring of an inter-caste union. Her grandmother, Mamachi, and uncle, Chacko, display an overt emotional detachment toward her, exposing the family's deeply rooted sectarian biases. Roy

underscores that while Rahel's fundamental necessities like **"food, clothes, fees"** were routinely provided, her relatives remained entirely uninvested emotionally. This domestic estrangement mirrors wider patterns of caste and gender prejudice operating across Indian society. As Spivak asserts, subaltern women are systematically stripped of self-determination and identity; Rahel's domestic isolation exemplifies this erasure. Consequently, her withdrawal into silence and emotional insulation serves as an intentional rebellion, rejecting the behavioral mandates enforced by an androcentric domestic order.

Within "***The Ministry of Utmost Happiness"***, Tilotama reveals an alternative layer of subaltern defiance, highlighting the suffering of disenfranchised Kashmiris devastated by geopolitical conflict. Spivak famously contends, "**The subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with 'woman' as a pious item. Representation has not withered away**". This premise underscores how, in Roy's novel, elite narratives consistently regulate and efface subaltern perspectives within dominant systems of representation. Tilotama, defined by an ambiguous lineage and enduring social disgrace, personifies this multi-layered exclusion. As a close companion notes, her mother, ostracized after a scandalous love affair with an "**untouchable**" man, was cast out by her relatives and compelled to abandon her daughter to an orphanage. This indeterminate heritage, combined with her dedication to the Kashmiri struggle, underscores her revolt against orthodoxy. Roy's portrayal of Tilotama's profound empathy illustrates that subaltern female resistance expands beyond individualism to construct solidarity with oppressed populations, aggressively dismantling institutionalized tyranny.

Like Anjum, a transgender woman in "***The Ministry of Utmost Happiness***", Revathy has been victimized by a male-dominated society, as women have been restricted from following their passions. :In her letter, Revathy writes

I wanted to be a lawyer and put my father behind bars forever. But soon I became influenced by " communism and revolutionary thinking. I read communist literature. My grandfather taught me "revolutionary songs, and we would sing together.

Revathy's observations expose how an androcentric framework systematically regulates female desires and autonomy. Nonetheless, subaltern women draw inspiration from distinct personal histories to refuse subjugation. For instance, Revathy's comprehension of structural misogyny stems from witnessing her. As a radical figure in Arundhati Roy's "***The Ministry of Utmost Happiness"***, Revathy exposes the systemic brutality inflicted upon marginalized groups, particularly through state-sanctioned violence. She articulates the terror and forced displacement experienced by indigenous communities: "**No adivasi can stay in her house or their village. They sleep in the forest outside at night because at night police come, hundred, two hundred, sometimes five hundred police. They take everything, burn, steal everything**" (p. 421). This harrowing account unmasks the raw mechanisms of state terror against disenfranchised populations. Yet, these targeted communities foster collective defiance, identifying their exploitation and demanding equity. As Guha [26] observes, authoritative regimes rule subaltern populations without genuine consensus — a legacy of institutionalized colonialism that Roy [27] asserts persists in post-independence India, necessitating ongoing resistance.

Conclusion

This study investigates the characterization and defiance of subaltern women in Arundhati Roy's "***The God of Small Things"*** and "***The Ministry of Utmost Happiness"***, demonstrating how her protagonists mirror evolving tactics for confronting systemic oppression. Throughout her fiction, Roy depicts disenfranchised women who actively combat social, cultural, and political inequalities, though the scale and execution of their rebellion diverge. Guided by Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's

theories on subaltern agency, Antonio Gramsci's counter-hegemony, and Kimberlé Crenshaw's framework of gender intersectionality, this analysis clarifies how Roy's marginalized female figures .continuously adapt their resistant strategies to match India's changing socio-political landscapes

Within "***The God of Small Things***", Roy's female protagonists navigate patriarchal and caste-based barriers that restrict their autonomy across familial and public networks. For instance, Ammu disrupts these frameworks by reclaiming self-determination over her marital and romantic life, intentionally crossing rigid sectarian divides. Her decisions constitute a radical strike against androcentric social paradigms, yet this defiance remains largely confined within domestic spaces. This characterization corresponds with Spivak's configuration of "**subaltern agency**," wherein marginalized subjects cultivate critical awareness and resist dominance, yet often remain trapped inside institutional enclosures. Ammu's rebellions manifest individual autonomy; however, they lack the systemic leverage to catalyze transformation beyond her immediate domestic landscape, illustrating an intimate mode of defiance ultimately bottlenecked by the very forces it targets.

Conversely, "***The Ministry of Utmost Happiness***" broadens the scale of subaltern female rebellion, shifting from isolated domestic actions to collective political mobilization. Roy's subsequent protagonists, such as Anjum and Tilotama, embody a macro-level resistance that confronts gender asymmetric structures alongside intersecting crises of caste, majoritarianism, transphobia, and economic exclusion. These figures build coalitions with diverse disenfranchised communities, openly defying state-backed and systemic cruelties that threaten their communal survival. Anjum, a trans woman, and Tilotama, who navigates militarized geopolitical conflicts, personify Gramsci's theory of counter-hegemony by forging cross-identity alliances to contest structural hierarchy. Through this shared struggle, Roy's characters construct a unified front against institutional power, signaling an expanded subaltern agency anchored in intersectional solidarity.

Concurrently, these narratives offer rich terrain for subsequent scholarship. Areas focusing on environmental degradation, collective trauma and memory, the representation of queer and transgender subjectivities in contemporary world literature, or the intersections of faith, identity and political resistance in modern South Asia present fertile avenues for future research.

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