

Trauma(s) of Living in a Diseased Society: A Peep into the ‘Duniya’ of Arundhati Roy’s *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

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Abstract

Looking at the turbulent global and social scenario, a humanist mind cannot stop thinking about the same and his/her pen becomes more active than earlier while giving voice to the countless unheard stories: the troubles and horrors, the trauma(s) of living discriminated life, the distressing experiences of each individual. And when the structure of the so-called society is splintered, the inhabitants become the genuine victims, and psychological and cultural wounds are created in the mind of whole society. With the gradual development of fractures in the society’s body, the traumatic and poignant psychological and cultural wounds unveil themselves quite visibly with the help of creative minds. Arundhati Roy, always used her creative output to throw brave and scorching light on the dark sides of the society, where each and every sector is undergoing different types of traumas irrespective of class, caste and gender. Humanity is at stake and even the non-humans are traumatized living in the so-called ‘Duniya’. Being one of the most courageous and innovative intellectuals of our time, she has enough potential to scrutinize the problems of society using her sharp pen. In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, she brought to the fore multiple genuine traumatic narratives with so much acuteness and sharpness, which have strong magnetic power to attract the attention of the sensitive eyes of the whole world. This paper endeavors to scrutinize what dominant role does trauma play and how Roy handles the same while illustrating the realistic narratives of a diseased society.

Keywords: *Cultural trauma, collectivity, discrimination, crime, violence, rape*

Being a “fearless witness to the history of the present” (Roy, “Utmost Happiness”), Arundhati Roy engaged her creative mind and thought boldly in bringing to the fore a bewildering fusion of multiple realistic narratives of a society through her long-awaited second novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017). Realistic images of the dark sides of a society have found out a proper medium to attract the attention of whole world. Critics have used this feature of this novel to analyze it as a work depicting the writer’s humanist view, the discourse of women’s rights, the injustice done to the have-nots and so on. Like her first novel, this one also focuses on the discriminations done towards those who are supposed to be the weaker ones, either they are women or Dalits, or they are the people living in the forest areas or the third gender people. Interestingly, Roy did not forget to mention the non-humans through her creative output, as she

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illustrates very minutely the share of the non-humans in this world and how much they are worried about the turmoil. However, Roy's novel mirrors another significant critical aspect far beyond the stylistic and political reading of the text: the dominant role of trauma in producing the bewildering narratives and the acute sufferings and problems faced by the characters of the novel. The most important aspect of the novel is that most of the characters are facing traumatic experiences in their lives and the society as a whole is socially and culturally traumatized and the characters are the representatives of those traumas. In Roy's first novel *The God of Small Things* (1997), "The temporal hybridity... actually reflects the trauma that certain brutal material realities may produce; in her depiction of collective trauma in particular, Roy pushes against nonmaterialist readings and explores the harmful effects of caste prejudice, sexism, and commercial and political colonizations" (Outka 23-24). Here again, after twenty years, Roy threw her bold look at the society and the gap of twenty years actually broadened her view towards life as well as traumas and sufferings of people. Her sharp creative mind entered into the nook and corner of the society and expressed them through all the characters. The setting of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is not restricted only to one village as in *The God of Small Things*, rather it is a "patchwork of narratives" (Clark) throwing an "ambitious look at turmoil in India" (Kukutani).

The current sense of trauma was not the original one, rather initially it meant corporal injury, deriving its meaning from the Ancient Greek word 'wound' (Davis and Meretoja 1). Later in the nineteenth century, with the gradual emergence of the discourses of psychoanalytic criticism, the term gained more importance than earlier referring conspicuously to the emotional and psychological wounds. But now a days, it is no more restricted to the psychology of individual human being or collective humanity, rather it is also used to refer to the whole global culture sometimes. The global culture can be traumatic because of some wounds created to the culture itself and humanity cannot keep itself aloof from the damage done to the global culture. The Freudian concept of trauma is based on the "abreactive model" as Freudian concept "emphasizes the necessity to recreate or abreact through narrative recall of the experience" (Balaev 150). Trauma theorist Cathy Caruth, whose edited volume *Trauma: Explorations in memory* (1995) proved itself to be a milestone, provided an idea of trauma which is related to the diagnostic category of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as he mentioned, "The pathology consists [...] solely in the *structure of its experience* or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who

experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (qtd. in Whitehead 5). However, a trauma novel “demonstrates how a traumatic event disrupts attachments between self and others by challenging fundamental assumptions about moral laws and social relationships that are themselves connected to specific environments” (Balaev 149-150). Again, the trauma novels very minutely represent “this disruption between the self and others by carefully describing the place of trauma because the physical environment offers the opportunity to examine both the personal and cultural histories imbedded in landscapes that define the character’s identity and the meaning of the traumatic experience” (150). Even literary texts provide sufficient space to capture boldly the trauma(s) in individual as well as collective consciousness. According to Lay Trauma theory, traumas are those events that “shatter an individual and collective actor’s sense of well-being” (Alexander et al. 2). Human beings are always in search of a fully-structured life of love and security. “If something happens that sharply undermines these needs, it hardly seems surprising, according to the lay theory, that people will be traumatized as a result” (3). In Partition literature, the writers like Amitav Ghosh, Bapsi Sidhwa, Khuswant Singh, Saadat Hasan Manto et al. very minutely illustrated the trauma of Partition through the characters and this is also the same about the literary works that dealt with the theme of Holocaust. Now let us have a look at *The Ministry*’s ‘Duniya’ to find out how Roy offered the illustrations of people and their traumas.

Roy has represented a fragmented and traumatic ‘duniya’, which is a collage of many shattered images, through her *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. And in doing so, she chose a language which is capable enough to illustrate the fractures and wounds of the society. In one of her interviews, Roy mentioned,

But when my universe became very much more complicated, the people in *The Ministry*, basically it was almost like that, they just started visiting me, you know, they come and drop in and then after a while this whole gang just moved into my house and would not go away, you know, and I needed another language and I almost felt like I had to take the language of *The God of Small Things* and throw it down from a very tall building and smash it and pick up the pieces and that became *The Ministry*.... (Roy, “Characters Visited Me”)

Before the novel’s wonderful but traumatic cycle of events sets out its journey, Roy’s dedication of the novel makes an earnest appeal to the sensitive minds, as it is dedicated to “The

Unconsoled". This dedication is enough to make us understand what the theme of the novel may be. Roy clarifies her position regarding this dedication in one of her interviews, "All of us, in secret, even if we don't show it. Some of us do, and some of us don't. But I think the world is unconsoled right now" (Roy, "Full Extended Interview"). And when the novel opens up its journey, it starts from the end, the graveyard and ends in the same graveyard though at the end that same graveyard has turned into something that denotes new beginning, it's the "doosri duniya" (Roy, *Ministry* 110), and those who were living a traumatic life in a diseased 'duniya' have found out another world full of new hopes and possibilities. At the very beginning, Roy introduced us with Anjum, a hermaphrodite, who was born Aftab and lived a colorful life which was, on the one hand, full of troubles and on the other, it brought her to the spotlight. Normally for a mother, the time of her child's birth is a moment of supreme bliss, but for Aftab's mother, the moment she saw her new born babe, it became the moment of extreme horror as "she discovered, nestling underneath his body-parts, a small, unformed, but undoubtedly girl-part" (7). Roy has raised a very significant question-cum-answer, "Is it possible for a mother to be terrified of her own baby?" (7). Motherhood was terrified that day with a view of the child as the mother knew what a traumatic life was her child going to have as in society the third gender people are thrown out of the popular male-female binary and they are not allowed to do what the previous two genders are supposed to do. The traumatic childhood experiences of Aftab forced him to accept the corner of the house as a suitable shelter for him as he was facing the society's "snickering and teasing": *He's a She. He's not a He or a She. He's a He and a She. She-He. He-She Hee! Hee! Hee!*" (12). Cathy Caruth mentioned in her *Unclaimed Experience*, "Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way its very assimilated nature—the way it was *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on" (qtd. in Balaev 151). The 'snickering and teasing' of the 'duniya' started to haunt Aftab regularly and forced him to stop going to Ustad Hameed Khan to learn Hindustani classical music, though he was very good at that in his childhood. From that very age, Aftab started experiencing identity crisis because of his dialectical relation with the society. He does not fit in the "Duniya" (53) which is only meant for male and female binary and where, time and again, they would have to hear people saying, 'they are not like us!'. The third gender people, though according to the mythological texts they are sometimes accepted as having good positions, in practical life they have to experience the conflict both physically and socially and they remain culturally traumatised. Their trauma is based on two-fold conflict, on the one hand

they have conflict with self and on the other, with the society. When they start to grow up, dilemma starts in their minds as they can feel the difference in their body and mind. Aftab in Roy's novel feels the same dilemma and also the society's snuffling and irritating remarks forced him to prefer the corner of his house in his childhood.

Again, Roy brings to the fore, the traumatic experiences faced by the Dalits and the tribal people living in the forest areas. They have become the victims of cultural trauma as the "members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (Alexander et al.1). Dayachand, who later takes the name of Saddam Hussain is the best example in this regard as he remained unable to live a Dalit life with all those socially-constructed and socially-sanctioned discriminations in a society where the 'Chamars' like him are easily exploited based on the demands of the upper caste people. Dayachand's family became the victim in the hands of cow lovers, though he and his father were taking away the corpse of a dead cow, the 'cow protectors' took revenge of 'cow slaughtering' by killing Dayachand's father, the 'demon'. These traumatic events force Dayachands to change their identities "for trauma is not the result of a group experiencing pain. It is the result of this acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity's sense of its own identity" (Alexander et al.10). There are many Dayachands who are becoming the victims of the gradual emergence of Hindutva consciousness and they are traumatized culturally. Once Roy comments on the same, "...gaw Raksha, which is cow protection...is a huge issue today, I mean, people are being lynched and killed about even today but it began hundred and fifty years ago..." (Roy, "What Language"). Roy's illustration of the tribal people living in the forest of the East Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh exhibits another example of cultural trauma through Revathy's letter to Dr. Azad Bharatiya:

Thousands of police and paramilitary are in the forest. Killing adivasis, burning villages. 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 everything, steal everything. Chickens, goats, money. They want adivasi people to vacate forest so they can make steel township and mining. (Roy, *Ministry* 421)

The fractured and tormenting 'duniya' forced these people to live a painful life "for trauma

is not something naturally existing; it is something constructed by society” (Alexander et al. 2). The women of the forest are the worst sufferers as they are doubly marginalized—by the patriarchal society and by the police and paramilitary. On the one hand Roy described, how Revathy’s mother, Indumati was terribly tortured by her husband because of the skin colour of her children and on the other, how the police used to torture and rape the women of that Forest. The novel exhibits the poignant imageries of trauma through the sufferings of Indumati and Revathy. Indumati became a prey to the custom of dowry and later on she became a female sufferer in domestic violence and Revathy became a victim of sexual assault. Revathy brought to the fore the pathetic “experience of so many women in the forest” (*Ministry* 423) through her own terrible experience as she was gangraped by six policemen. She was not only gangraped, but she was also brutally tortured. Those policemen cut her skin with knife, they put cigarettes on her. She did not even know who the father of her daughter was and that traumatic experience forced her to send her daughter to the Jannat Guest house which, unlike the ‘duniya’ would not ask the ‘illegitimate’ child about her parents and would not raise questions about her birth history and would give her safety. Rape has become one of the extreme forms of violence now-a-days. Roy once boldly commented on this rape culture and its impact on the women of forest areas, which is used as a resource method of domination. Roy comments, if there is any law “that will protect the middle-class women” but what will protect the lower-class women “when the police themselves go and burn down villages and gang-rape” (“Arundhati Roy Speaks”)? Sue J. Daniels in his book *Working with the Trauma and Sexual Violence* writes, “Rape and sexual assault are not about sex or a sexual relationship” rather “they are serious crimes about power, control, humiliation and domination” (23) and “the aftermath of the crime of rape has the power to leave a person in a state of imbalance and emotional turmoil” (24). This mental condition leads the victim to a traumatized state: “Victims of rape are more often severely traumatised by the assault” (Daniels 25). Revathy is the representative of all those victims. Roy’s pen-picture of an individual shattered psychology tells us about many dark aspects of the ‘duniya’. But communist Revathy, a courageous woman, was not defeated; the red eyes and clutches of ‘duniya’ could not destroy her after the beastly activities of the policemen. She survived to struggle against all odds and to let her daughter have the view of the world in a different form, in the form of ‘doosri duniya’.

About the memory of trauma Freud was of the view that it is “a foreign body which long after its entry must continue to be regarded as an agent that is still at work” (qtd. in

Alexander et al. 33) and Tilottama and Maryam Ipe are Roy's realistic creations who were psychologically traumatised and that events caused many harms to them throughout their lives. Maryam Ipe, the biological mother of Tilo all her life remained her foster mother as society did not grant the love relation between a 'touchable' and an 'untouchable' and that feeling of guilt ceaselessly troubled the mother, though she never expressed that until in her insanity. The suffering, the feeling of guilt, the trauma, everything she kept hidden in the deep core of her heart. All these always tormented her, did not give her solace. Towards the end of her life, the traumatized mother became almost insane and out of that insanity, lying on the hospital bed, she instructed Tilo, "Go and tell everybody that 'This is my mother, Ms Maryam Ipe, and she is one hundred and fifty years old'" (*Ministry* 249). Unlike Ammu of *The God of Small Things*, Maryam Ipe Continued her fight, though both of them went through the same fate earlier. Later Ammu died an unknown and untimely death, whereas Maryam Ipe became "an iconic feminist" (*Ministry* 239). Roy's desire to give Ammu a respectable position in society was not fulfilled in her first fictional work, but the gap of twenty years in her fiction-writing career provided her that space and finally her desire was fulfilled in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* through the character of Maryam Ipe. Tilottama remained afraid all her life to be a mother as "she did not trust that she would be a better parent than Mariam Ipe. Her clear-eyed assessment of herself was that she'd be a far worse one. She did not wish to inflict herself on a child. And she did not wish to inflict a replication of herself on the world" (*Ministry* 391). Maryam Ipe's failure to accept Tilo as her own biological daughter because of the prohibitions of society; Maryam's identity of being the foster mother of her own daughter Tilo who knows the actual truth; Tilo's life of being an adopted child of her own mother—all these caused a great negative impact on the mind of Tilottama (Tilo), one of the most important characters of the novel. These traumatic events in Tilo's life shattered her own self and led her to find her own identity rejecting the shackles of 'duniya'. The negative psychological impact of these traumatic events of her life forced her to abort herself without anaesthesia as she understood that she could not be a better mother than her own mother.

Roy's humanist look didn't forget to fall upon Kashmir which is a place of continuous trouble and turmoil, where normalcy is always declared, where people are always frightened about the next moment, where people "do terrible things to each other... wound and betray and kill each other" (*Ministry* 194). Crime and violence are all time buddies of the Kashmiris; trauma of living in unrest is the constant companion of the Kashmiris. It is that Kashmir where

“Life went on. Death went on. The war went on” (324). These deaths and wars make many innocent people terrorists. Musa is one such example. The unrest in Kashmir snatched his innocent wife and daughter from him. Each of them became prey to the unrest of Kashmir.

Michelle Balaev writes, “The Traumatized protagonist in fiction brings into awareness the specificity of individual trauma that is often connected to larger social factors and cultural values or ideologies” and also such fictional work illustrates “a picture of the individual that suffers, but paints it in such a way as to suggest that this protagonist is an ‘everyperson’ figure” (155). In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, a number of different narratives and the protagonists of those narratives are affixed together in the form of a collage. Here Anjum, Tilottama, Maryam Ipe, Saddam Hossain (Dayachand), Indumati, comrade Revathy, Musa—everyone becomes the protagonist of his/her own narrative and speaks out his/her own poignant story. Roy illustrates quite poignantly “a powerful elegy for a bulldozed world” (Roy, Nilanjana) though there is hope for a better world, “another world is possible”, “Doosri duniya mumkin hai” (*Ministry* 110). Though the society is traumatised, new hope is never far away. Even, at the very end of the novel, Roy evocatively pictures the Guith Kyom, the dung beetle, who is “lying on his back with his legs in the air to save the world in case the heaven fell”, does know that “things would turn out all right in the end” (438).

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