



Research Paper

Seaming a Shattered Story: Roy's Narrative Patterns in the Ministry of Utmost Happiness

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[My second novel] is like a city – it has form and then that form is ambushed, and yet it still has form . . . it's not an accretion but it circles around itself, it has a structure . . . It is an Indian city, it has unauthorized colonies, it has illegal immigrants, it has do Dogs and cows and creatures and bats . . . it is a porous Indian city with its own plans (Roy, personal communication, Jan 16, 2018).

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There has been a lot of criticism that propped up after the publication of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* due to the incoherency in the narrative pattern. The narrative starts at the unusual setting of a necropolis, to depict the long litany of necropolitics created by the corrupted pseudo-democratic setup of India, under the clutches of globalization, materialization, industrialization, westernization and the other long list of existing political scams. By the order of structure, the novel starts with the story of Anjum, a trans-woman, precisely a woman trapped in a man's body. The time gap is adjusted to tell the story of Anjum right from her birth to the events that led her to the first setting of the graveyard. Through this part of the narrative, Roy molds the one half of the dystopian sphere by etching the caste craze, media politics, gender politics, globalization, islamophobia etc. that rules the democratic India, which cracked the whole set up and demolished the "the ministry of utmost happiness". The when Anjum and her party on the process of molding the utopia within the necropolis reaches Janata Mantar, the conjoining point of the novel, Anjum falls into a rabbit-hole, and the readers are tangentially taken into another dystopian half, to bring out some characters from that side into the fabrication of the utopia in the necropolis.

The second phase of the novel depicts the tales of four college mates, whose lives are intertwined by love. Tilo, the unconventional, rebellious, architect student and a to-be member of Anjum's utopia, is the unfulfilled love of the next narrator Biplab Das, who later to become a bureaucrat, Naga later to become a successful journalist and Musa, a Kashmiri forced to intensely involve himself in the struggle for freedom. The other half of the already framed dystopia is created through the star-crossed love of Musa and Tilo by showing the injustice of the government towards the downtrodden marginalized masses like women, poor, Kashmiri people, orphans, untouchables etc. This phase deconstructs the stereotypical notion of hero-worship of army, and the corruption in other governmental institution like police forces, doctors, politicians etc.

Thus the main stream of the narrative builds up the dystopian society, giving the readers an apocalyptic warning, whereas in the undercurrent Roy creates a utopia, build up by the rejects of the society under the guidance of Anjum. Miss Jebeen the second or Miss Udaya Jabeen is the ultimate diptych link in the narrative, connecting both halves of the dystopia, and is considered as a savior, who would help in the propagation of the maneuver of empathy, which in turn shows Roy's hope in the future generation, unlike her tone in *The End of Imagination*.

The first half of the story is said in the third person omniscient narrator who details the life of Anjum and the people associated with her. The second part altogether starts without a clue with Biplab Das as the narrator, introduced as 'The Landlord' by the title, and later as Hobart Garson (the name by which Tilo called him since he acted out that role in their skit). Thus this part of the narrative is subjective and biased as seen by the evidence, "Or at least that's the way I see it" (166), leading to an unreliable narration. To cull out this unreliability and also to firmly lay down the fountain for the dystopian setup, with as many as evidences, to

prove the authenticity of the upcoming apocalypse due to globalization and corruption, Roy uses varied narrative techniques like epistolary, stream of consciousness, pamphlets, news articles, hospital records, photographs, poems, addressed to an unknown character etc.

Roy employs the technique of foreshowing right from the beginning, using it as a diptych; it gives hint to the readers about the other half of the dystopia being built with an even stronger base. Similarly right from the beginning, Roy has included not only everyone, but everything in her narration, highly suggestive of her maneuver of empathy, for which she writes this novel, but explicitly announces it only in the end through Tilo's poem.

A major criticism that has arisen about the narrative of the novel is about its over expository nature. The narratives are too explanatory and direct that it leaves no subtext for the readers to chew on. The whole narration is done in the form of a heap of information packets that the reader is often left confused and bored. Instead of footnotes, each and every detail is over explained in the novel, leaving no space for the readers' imagination or curiosity, for e.g. explanation is given for the festival *dussehra* and Bollywood legends, not to speak of the Mughal history, which leaves the novel close-ended. But thematically the novel is open-ended. Character development is lost to the convenience of listing out the litany of corruptions of the system, as Roy is keen to include characters from each sphere through various narrative technique to drive home her message eloquently. Thus the novel gives the quotient of influence more value over that of pleasure or entertainment.

Fictional and non-fictional elements co-exist in the novel. The political leaders and the people one find in *JanataMantar* are so cunningly crafted that some have more similarities to the actual persons, yet fictional enough not to be sued for deformation, and yet some so real to life, yet totally fictional in reality. For e.g. the character which appears in the title *Gujarat kaLala* is in close resemblance to Modi and the man in hunger strike in *Janata Mantar* to Anna Hazare.

Like in *God of Small Things* one could find shades of autobiographical tinges in the novel. To assert her notion of empathy by the inclusion of everything, most of the characters are depicted as being benevolent to animals, especially the outcaste stray ones, like the characters themselves. Chiara Goia in her interview with Roy at her home in Delhi, for *The New York Times* notes "Roy's, Filthy, a stray, slept on the floor, her belly rising and falling rhythmically. The melancholic cry of a bird pierced the air. 'That's a hornbill' Roy said, looking reflective." This episode from her home so well represents the atmosphere of the *Jannat Guest House* in the graveyard where the 'ministry of utmost happiness' is found through empathy and inclusion. This creates an image of a practitioner than a preacher for Roy more than being autobiographical. Another autobiographical instance that we get from Goia is "Roy led me into the next room, where books and journals were scattered around the kitchen table that serves as her desk". A same setting is etched for Tilo's study in her rented apartment when Biplab intrudes into the narrative. It is interesting to note that in both her novels Roy brings in her root of Kerala. Even in the second novel, Tilo has a complicated childhood, and her mother is from the Syrian background in Kerala. Just like Roy's mother, the character is depicted as strong-willed and owns a school. The character of Tilo resembles Roy the most because just like her Tilo was also an architecture student but never constructed a building and also an activist.

Now the focus is being given to the connectives or the diptych within the text which knits the two halves of the book together. As Roy herself mentions, the story is scattered, thus these hints are scattered throughout the narratives, facilitating reflection or foreshadowing that helping the flow of the text. The main link is established by the short sixth chapter, 'Some Questions for Later', where the future of Miss Udaya Jebeen is foreshadowed, after which the story altogether keeps Anjum aside, to jump onto the story of Tilo. Even minor characters like D.D. Gupta, an admirer of Anjum is recollected by linking it with the phone that he gave her which she throws away, and later when Nimmo gifts her phone, Roy describes it as "This one she did not lose" (73). Though the narrative may seem to be shattered it is important to note that no question is left unanswered, or no block is left alone in this jigsaw puzzle. For instance, the question that Imam Zaiuddin asks in the end of the very first chapter gets answered through the latter chapters, precisely in page no.80, which is also a way of foreshadowing of the rise of *Jannat Guest House*, hence the omniscient nature of the narrator is also confirmed. At the end of some chapters, sentences like "Anjum waited to die- Sadam waited to kill – And miles away in a troubled forest, a baby waited to be born" (92), links the different diachronic halves of the narrative together. In the end of chapter five, Tilo thinks of Miss Udaya Jebeen as "Not because the baby was hers, but because it wasn't." which foreshadows her childhood, her abortion, and the story of Miss Jebeen the First. The existence of *Khwabgah* in the story gets long forgotten once Anjum moves to the graveyard, and further through the introduction of Tilo, but Roy never allows loose ends to flag around in her story, thus recollects the lives at *Khwabgah* through the introduction of "the Sound and Light show at Red Fort" (285) and "the unmistakable deep, coquettish giggle of a court eunuch. (286), when Tilo comes back after her pregnancy, to show that both the narratives existed simultaneously in different dystopian spheres of their own. When Biplab discovers the photographs and journal records from Tilo's room, it doesn't make any specific sense but pass out as casual things in a house, but each of these things are accurately linked while recalling the past events, thus

knitting it well together. For e.g. in Tilo's room Biplab finds "a picture of an unusually short, bearded young man. . . . crouching in the bowl of his hands two tiny kittens, . . . holding them out, as though he's offering them to the photographer to touch or stroke." (191) Later we come to know that it's Gulrez because he gives Tilo "a postcard-size print of a photograph of himself holding the kittens in the palm of his hands" (150). Again after the abortion, Tilo goes to the same graveyard where the Jannat Guest House was to be built later, but sees it in a different perspective shown through the lines, "To the mortuary, and beyond it, to a direct Muslim graveyard that seemed to have fallen into disguise. . . . There was nobody around". Towards the end of the novel Roy gives a summing up of the characters and notes where their life stands, as Anjum takes her gathered party to Hazarat Sarmad, where it all started. Anjum's journey towards 'the ministry of utmost happiness' started with her self-realization on seeing Bombay Silk and the novel ends on the same note when she narrates this story of their encounter to Miss Udaya Jebeen. The novel cannot be altogether said as close-ended because the future of this child decides the future of her utopian dream, as mentioned in chapter six.

The novel starts with the setting of the graveyard, then moves backward to Shahjahanabad, Delhi then to Khwabagh or the House of Dreams to the Jannat Guest House. Then it takes a shift to the urban Delhi or the city only to come back to Kashmir, to complete the dystopian sphere, but ultimately the two loose strands join in the Jannat Guest House, completing the utopian dream. In terms of the setting, this setting of the city can be seen as an evolution of the writer from a smaller canvas to a bigger one. But she still holds on to the smallness since she selected the marginalized minorities to propagate her maneuver of empathy.

Roy brings in various places the element of parallelism, metaphor and simile; contrastive statements etc. to show emphasis, depth and the idea of how the lives of the downtrodden are trivialized by the governmental authorities to meet their materialistic needs. For example the line "She knew very well that she knew very well that she knew very well" (63). Similar kinds of word play and repetition are used in the novel as in "Next to more than half the names it said (killed) (killed) (killed)" (222). The line "Shame about the wife and kids though." (204) is repeated by Biplab in the novel to show the victimization of women and children. The novel is peppered with parallelism like in "Life went on. Death went on. The war went on." (324) and contrastive statements like "In Kashmir, throwing a man's own bio-data at him was sometimes enough to change the course of life. And sometimes wasn't." (329), "He did not always succeed. Nor did he always fail." (144)

Sometimes parallelism is used as a foreshadowing technique, as in the case of Gulrez being compared to his rooster, who died unjustly in the hands of the military. In line with her motto of giving inclusion to not only everyone but also everything, there has been various use of personification in the novel like "tormented forest" (92) "tormented cities" (93).

Though the whole novel is a litany of the injustice done towards the underpowered which in turn resulting in the destruction of the whole setup, Roy doesn't fail to colour her novel with humour and sarcasm, which she tries to attain through word play and tingling with the phonological sensibility as in "Would you like to see a Milton?" (222) for militant, "Is this Democracy or Demon Crazy" (115). Another way in which comic is introduced is through the short stories included as diary entries as in 'The Old Man & His Sons' (271). Another example of humour or sarcasm is "Tourist flew out. Journalist flew in. honeymooners flew out. Soldiers flew in." (314).

Since her aim in the novel is to give voice to everything that is marginalized and voiceless thus cultivating empathy, the writer discusses Urdu, a language that is marginalized and almost lost its elegant purity. Roy deliberately has chosen this dying language to advocate the purity of the languages, at a time when language is at a high pace losing its purity through intermixing of languages, as said in the novel "a wake for lost glory and a dying language" (39). This part is interesting because by advocating the purity of language, Roy is not entirely shutting her door on the growth of the language at the rate of the contemporary needs, for example she coins new words in the novel like "stupidification" (393). In another instance Roy interferes in the text to show how contemporary usages affect the grammatical class. "I googled them. (That's a verb now, isn't it?)" (144). Use of nouns as verbs can be also seen as a way to trivialize events to highlight apathy, e.g. "the dead bodies are warehoused" (96), "some grave become double-deckered, like buses in Srinagar" (319)

The use of tense has been deliberate in the text to show perspective and emphasis, for instance, "the graphic design work with which she earns (*earns*, for God's sake!)" (189) and more directly as in "It worries me that I use past tense" (189).

Tim Lewis writes on his interview with Roy for *The Guardian*, "Arundhati Roy does not believe in rushing things. With her novels, she prefers to wait for her characters to introduce themselves to her, and slowly develop a trust and friendship with them." Roy seems to follow the path of Arnold or Eliot in viewing the mind of the author as a site in which the characters develop on their own. Since she gives each character their space to develop the language used varies within the narration. When Biplab is drunk in the rented room of Tilo the narrative style switches to resemble the drinking effect since Biplab being the narrator. The language used in the letter written by Miss Udaya Jebeen's mother is a true representation of creole English she being an adivasi

where most of the English is written ungrammatically peppered with 'also' and 'that', as most construction is direct translation from mother tongue to English. The accent of the foreigners is mocked in the narrative reversing the stereotypical way in which they look down upon the Indian English, "you are fery beautiful", he said" (52) "Sankyou", the young man said. Sankyou very much" (52). The notion of dialectic variations and geographical role in language is seen in "Her English was curiously unaccented, except that Z sometimes softened to S, so, for example, she would say 'Sip' for 'Zip'. I guess Kerala." Addition of euphemistic terms into language to clear it of the sexist and racist connotations is underlined in the sentence, "we don't use words like *nigger* anymore. It's a bad word. We say *negro*." (185).

At many a place nature is depicted in relation to the characters' psyche. For example the line "It had begun to snow again" (330) for the term of terror induced indifference into Musa's life. The imagery of snow is further carried over to depict situations in Kashmir, "and the forecast predicted more snow. Trees raised their naked, mottled branches to the sky like mourners stilled in attitudes of grief." (326).

Sometimes silence is effectively used to express a wide reservoir of meanings and sometimes tactics like "Women of course – Of course women" (321) to emphasis the frequency of the injustices done to women to the extent that it has become something so trivial to explain and discuss.

Roy mocks the contemporary pseudo-notions of an artist in the novel. "We live in awe of David Quartermaine, of his audacious, sexuality, his collection of books, his moodiness, his mumbling, and his sudden enigmatic silences, which we believed the prerequisite characteristics of a true artist" (154). Vaguely the notion of what literature is discussed through the story "NOTHING" in the novel that shows the current trend of themes in literature to get a good rating where entertainment is given upper hand over instruction.

I would like to write of those sophisticated stories in which even though nothing much Happens there's lots to write about. That can't be done in Kashmir. It's not sophisticated, what happens here. There's too much blood for good literature. (283)

Roy by the inclusion of these stories raises the question of what is sophisticated literature or good literature and "what is the acceptable amount of blood for good literature?" (283). This is a direct blow to writers who creates junk works just for the commercial popularity of these works, and is a question towards popular fiction versus serious fiction. Roy is also harping on the influential and educative value of literature, like how Arnold believed that poetry could have redemptive powers and urged his readers to promote good literature by touchstone method to refine literature to attain this goal. The ungrammatical sentence used in the above story shows how the role of a writer and literature itself has been degraded in the contemporary scenario were even art is approached with a materialistic instinct.

In her interview with Elizabeth Kuruvilla Roy "says her words live within her. Which is why there weren't many different drafts of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*- 'I do it all in my head'". But this lack of editing has been severely criticized in the case of her second novel. For instance, *The Wire* reviewed "*The Ministry of Utmost happiness* is noble in its vision, ambitious in its scope and dreadful in its editing".

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