

Understanding Silence in Arundhati Roy's novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

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Abstract

Arundhati Roy invests the two protagonists in her novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) – Anjum and Tilottama – with a silence that operates at multiple levels. Mostly it's the numbness of frustration and hopelessness in the face of apathy and identity crisis. In Rushdie's style, Roy's novel touches upon crucial historical moments of Indian history. An intricate tapestry of Indian life and its mores emerges through variegated and overlapping personal accounts. Through Anjum, the Muslim transgender woman, one explores the qualitative difference of marginality she faces vis-a-vis a heteronormative Muslim woman. Tilottama or Tilo is also full of ambiguity. She's a trained architect who peregrinates through the Kashmir valley. Silence ultimately seems to be an invisibility cloak for her as well. Literally and metaphorically, both Anjum and Tilo withdraw into the non-world of a graveyard. It's argued through this paper that the two protagonists can be viewed through a layered reading using a gender, queer and most importantly the lens of intersectionality.

Keywords: Silence, Hijra, Kashmir, Intersectionality

George Eliot makes a poignant point in the novel *Middlemarch*:

If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. (Eliot 162)

While silencing has been a weapon at the disposal of the powerful, silence has also been a tool in the hands of the ones oppressed. Indubitably violence is inherent in the act of muffling a voice or denying agency. Silence in and of itself is not a violent act but when it is enforced, there is no other name for it. Indian fiction produced in English has dealt with the theme of silence time and time again. Shashi Deshpande's novel *That Long Silence* and the novel *Fire on the Mountain* by Anita Desai, to name only two, are novels that testify to this in varying measures. Esthappen in Arundhati Roy's 1997 novel *The God of Small Things* is a character who becomes silent to an extent that detecting his presence in a room was sometimes tricky.

Arundhati Roy's novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (TMUH) focuses on Indian ethos spanning from the 1950s to the 2010s. The 2017 novel is Eliotesque in scope and Rushdiesque in style. One meets several characters and comes across variegated plots and subplots. The novel is enmeshed in several interconnected strands and narratives. It traverses back and forth in time. The novel reads like a condensed history of both – the writer herself along with her activism and the nation in its darkest hours.

The story begins and ends in a graveyard. The destiny of the two main characters, Anjum and Tilottama, unravels in a convoluted mosaic-like manner. While Anjum's story begins from the beginning, Tilottama's ensues in medias res. Anjum's life story is essentially about her transformation from a male body to trans female identity. Tilottama, shorn of any safety nets, studies Architecture in Delhi and following her love interest's cue takes a precarious journey through Kashmir. Both the characters slowly veer into silence and join forces to create the ministry away from the normative where everyone chooses one's own stamp of happiness. Roy presents a host of characters who fall in between crevices of history without marking their presence in the mainstream. Not because they don't put up a fight but because they are rendered invisible by the powerful forces they are surrounded by. This paper focuses on the two protagonists of the novel in whom silence is amplified.

One main strand through which various silenced characters in this novel can be viewed is that of intersectionality. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, to whom the provenance of this theory is credited, says in a video:

Intersectionality is just a metaphor for understanding the ways multiple forms of inequality or disadvantage sometimes compound themselves and create obstacles that often are not understood within conventional ways of thinking about anti-racism or feminism or whatever social justice advocacy structures we have. (YouTube)

She also says that instead of being a grand theory intersectionality is a prism through which various overlapping complications in life can be judged and understood: Heterosexism, transphobia, xenophobia, ableism all of these social dynamics come together and create challenges that are sometimes quite unique. (Ted video)

Mary John elaborates on Intersectionality in an interview saying that it's about people who get lost at the intersections implying that phrases such as doubly or triply oppressed are problematic. This theory helps to identify the qualitative difference between various kinds of oppression as opposed to indicating "a more of the same." (YouTube)

Another interesting lens via which silence in the novel can be viewed is through Alex Tickell's reading of "necropolis" in the parallel narratives of the two protagonists. While Anjum, a disheartened hijra moves literally into a graveyard, Tilottama, a non-conformist woman peregrinates through the paradisiacal Kashmir valley, which has turned into a graveyard. The Jannat Guest House is the final literal and metaphorical space where an

alternative *duniya* is created where all the unconsolated and unaccepted souls congregate. The subaltern in this novel, therefore, finds a voice and agency.

The novel opens with the ominous sentence: "She lived in the graveyard." (Roy 3) The "She" is Anjum. Free-flowing and unabashed conversations take place at this point in the story. However, as one slips into history a virulent and suffocating silence bursts at the seams. One learns that Anjum, a Shia Muslim born intersex and named Aftab, was initially raised as a boy. When Anjum's mother, Jahanara Begum, discovers "girl parts" in her otherwise-perfect just-born boy's body, she is shattered.

In Urdu, the only language she knew, all things, not just living things but all things – carpets, clothes, books, pens, musical instruments – had a gender. Everything was either masculine or feminine, man or woman. Everything except her baby. Yes of course she knew there was a word for those like him – Hijra. Two words actually, Hijra and Kinnar. But two words do not make a language. (Roy 8)

The narratorial comment immediately after this thought runs like this: "Was it possible to live outside the language? Naturally, this question did not address itself to her in words, or as a single lucid sentence. It addressed itself to her as a soundless, embryonic howl." (Roy 8) Aftab has a beautiful voice but the sound of scorn and ridicule silences him forcing him to renounce his one true gift. Once he witnesses a "tall woman with lipstick, gold high heels and a shiny, green satin salwar kameez" (Roy 18) Aftab irrevocably leaves the heteronormative mantle behind to cloak in the God-given trans identity. Khwabgah becomes the "only place in his world where he felt the air made way for him." (Roy 19)

Khwabgah is a place populated by the fringe, the outsiders and the misfits. They refer to the conventional as Duniya. Nimmo Gorakhpuri, one of the residents asks Aftab if he knew why God made Hijras.

It was an experiment. He decided to create something, a living creature that is incapable of happiness.... for us the price-rise and school admissions and beating-husbands and cheating wives are all inside us. The riot is inside us. The war is inside us. Indo-Pak is inside us. It will never settle down. It can't. (Roy 23)

Unable to comprehend this unsettling picture initially but at fourteen Aftab finally does grasp Nimmo's morbid interpretation. As his body metamorphoses into a masculine form outside and feminine inside and as his once-sweet voice loses the charm he chooses to resort to silence unfamiliar to him just yet: "He was repelled by it and scared each time he spoke. He grew quiet, and would speak only as a last resort...He stopped singing." (Roy 24)

Clearly, silence doesn't dawn only when extrinsically forced, it is a warped living breathing thing that takes hold from within too. Once the music leaves, Aftab departs from

duniya for good and enters Khwabgah as a permanent resident acquiring an openly trans identity. On Anjum's eighteenth birthday Ustad Kulsoom Bi, one of the chiefs of the Delhi Hijra Gharana, throws her a party. Bedecked in a "red 'disco' sari, with a backless choli, Anjum goes to bed imagining herself a new bride. But her body, once again refusing definitions, confounds her: "She awoke distressed to find her sexual pleasure had expressed itself into her new garment like a man's." (Roy 27) Words are insufficient for this embarrassment. She sits in the courtyard howling like a wolf.

Ustad Kulsoom Bi, rejecting Nimmo's assessment of a Hijra, says: "Hijras were chosen people, beloved of the Almighty. The word Hijra, she said, meant, a Body in which a Holy Soul lives." (Roy 27) Roy gives a candid description of how the so-called dream world is full of politics and collusions. Time plays its role and Anjum adopts an abandoned baby girl. The outside world is always unimportant and thus silenced for Anjum. A doting mother, Anjum hardly notices the winds of change she is surrounded by – the Emergency, September 11, and rise of the Right-wing politics.

The two worlds collide ominously when she finds herself in the middle of a communal riot. Anjum, accompanied by one Zakir Mian decides to go to Ajmer for a pilgrimage, as travelling alone would cause "harassment and humiliation of being seen as well as of being unseen." The trip to Godhra changes Anjum's reality forever. Upon her return her silence is more disturbing than ever before: "She was quiet, disconcertingly so, and spent most of her time with her books." (Roy 47) In fact, she had been spared by the mob because of her anatomy and not their humanity. It would have spelt bad luck for them to murder and maim a hijra. The mob does not leave without throwing ridicule and expletives at her: "Ai Hai! Saali Randi Hijra! Sister-fucking Whore Hijra. Sister-fucking Muslim Whore/Hijra!" (Roy 62)

It pains her that she was spared so the rioters and the rapists could prosper. She was their "Butchers' Luck" (Roy 63). Had she been a Muslim man or woman, she would have been "folded and unfolded" (Roy 63). This intersection of pain and irremediable damage silences her: "She tried to un-know that little detail as she rattled through her private fort. But she failed. She knew very well that she knew very well that she knew very well." (Roy 63)

Anjum, as a queer becomes doubly distanced from the mainstream as she leaves Khwabgah and enters the graveyard where her family is buried, shunning her shiny clothes and even basic hygiene. This works as an intense metaphor. While duniya cannot accommodate disparate identities, even those who are a part of the rejected fulcrum of humanity cannot always offer sanctuary or solace. Anjum has to find solace among apparitions to make any real sense of her being.

For months Anjum lived in the graveyard. A ravaged, feral spectre, out-haunting every resident djinn and spirit, ambushing bereaved families who came to bury their dead with grief so wild, so untethered, that it clean outstripped theirs. (Roy 63)

Over time she recuperates and eventually, Anjum finds herself in a fete of fates of sorts at Jantar Mantar where several protesters and justice-seekers congregate. She witnesses – the charade of anti-corruption champions (who ironically get all the attention) vis-à-vis protesting farmers; Bhopal gas tragedy sufferers still seeking compensation; tribals with houses submerged under big dams; Kashmiri mothers whose sons have disappeared among many others. These are all substantive examples of intersections in the history of the country. Roy evokes these images kaleidoscopically. Everyone listed here is part of history but is strategically kept out of it as neither privatised media gives them fair air time nor do politicians pay heed.

Shining light particularly on Dayachand, a Dalit who also made Jannat Guest House his home. Vowing to kill a policeman, he acquires the name, Saddam Hussain. Sehrawat, the corrupt cop is his nemesis as he had done nothing to prevent his father's lynching at the hands of frenzied *gau rakshaks*. Once again, the really significant sentiments can find voice either in a whisper or complete lull. "I was part of the mob that killed my father." (Roy 89) The chapter titled "Khwabgah" ends with these lines:

Anjum wanted to die.

Saddam wanted to kill.

And miles away, in a troubled forest, a baby waited to be born. (Roy 92)

The baby referred to here is named Udaya, also called Miss Jebeen the Second who is birthed by Comrade Revathy, a Maoist from Andhra Pradesh who is gang-raped and tortured by six policemen. The appearance of the child is cloaked in stark silence. In the Jantar Mantar melee, Anjum witnesses this spectacle:

Her skin was blue-black, sleek as a baby seal. She was wide awake but perfectly quiet, unusual for someone so tiny. Perhaps, in those first short months of her life, she had already learned that tears, her tears at least, were futile. (Roy 96)

This quiet bundle is what unites and ties all the main characters of the novel together, in the solemn silence of course. Tilottama also arrives at the Anna Hazare agitation and rescues the foundling. Arundhati Roy was asked in an interview if Tilo was a reflection of her own self. This is how Roy responded:

Well, actually, to me, Tilo, Tilottama, is the fictional child of Ammu and Velutha in *The God of Small Things* had their story ended differently. She's the younger sibling of Esthappen and Rahel. So, you know, I know her well, but I'm not her. (Democracy Now!)

In the same interview Roy comments on Tilo's character thus:

Tilo, in the book, is called the city—a country who lives in her own skin, a country with no consulates, a person whose quietness destabilizes people, you know, a person whose most intimate—whose signs of being intimate with someone is to not to greet them or, you know, to not change her expression when someone she loves comes. (Democracy Now!)

Silence regarding Tilo's birth is problematic. Tilo's mother abandons her as she was a product of a socially unacceptable affair with a low-caste man. Later she adopts her own daughter from the orphanage. Eventually, Tilo's mother is hugely respected in the community for the evangelical social work she carries out. But she never publicly accepts the truth. When she is close to her end, she grows more and more psychotic. Incoherence is also a silence of some hue. What is the purpose of communication? To be admitted into a common code of community and understanding. Her daughter takes on the role of her amanuensis taking notes silently by her bedside. Several of those ramblings further push Tilo underground. One of them reads: "I spent my life doing ridiculous things. I produced a baby. Her." (Roy 250)

Tilo has three men in her life – Musa Yeswi (a Kashmiri turned reluctant fundamentalist), Naga (a journalist) and Biplab Dasgupta (a high-ranking intelligence officer). And they all play a convoluted role in her life. Musa is her one true love. But in a world ridden with landmines, the coming-together is just wishful thinking. Musa marries Arifa and fathers Miss Jebeen the First. The little girl and her mother succumb to the same bullet. Musa succumbs to the silence of the shroud, turning into a shadow: "All those who watched Musa Yeswi bury his wife and daughter noticed how quiet he had been that day. He displayed no grief." (Roy 325) A personalised reaction of shock or lack of it after losing a young wife and a three-year-old beloved daughter is also forbidden. Silence even evokes suspicion.

Musa was not arrested at a check post. He was picked up from his home after the funeral. Over-quietness at the funeral of your wife and child would not have passed unnoticed in those days. (Roy 325)

Through Musa, Roy lends a face and a voice to a common Kashmiri who just wishes to lead a normal life but gets engulfed in the eerie undeclared war. She is taken prisoner by a cold and intense intelligence officer named Amrik Singh. She has the quick wit to ask for Biplab Dasgupta (Garson Hobart), the deputy head of the Intelligence Bureau in Kashmir. Hopelessly infatuated with her but for logistical reasons Dasgupta sends Naga instead, to rescue her from the detention centre where she is tortured and has her head shorn. This

moment connects the fate of the two protagonists in a quiet contract. Both are allowed to survive, albeit with terrible memories, by their potential killers.

Amrik Singh untied Tilo and helped her to her feet. He made a show of dusting the hair off her shoulders. He put a huge hand protectively on her scalp – a butcher's blessing. It would take Tilo years to get over the obscenity of that touch. (Roy 383)

Tilo marries Naga as suggested by Musa for strategic reasons and gives up the charade after fourteen years. Slowly devolving into silence. The Kashmir conundrum is conveyed not from the point of view of azadi-seekers but through the eyes of the soldiers and policemen stationed there. Biplab Dasgupta is allowed a first-person perspective. Dasgupta is by no means a caricature as he develops a deeper understanding of the tragedy unfolding in Kashmir. All the same, he is unable to face up to his own complicity. He resigns from his post and coops up in the same apartment he rented out to Tilo after she divorces Naga. Essentially the guilt does not kill him. Dasgupta's colleague Amrik Singh is less lucky. In Kashmir, he runs an official torture chamber of sorts. Silence cannot be more unnerving than in a space where sadism and insanity reign supreme. But as irony would have it, he seeks asylum in the US claiming to be a victim of torture. By the by he goes insane, kills his family and commits suicide because he cannot cope with the guilt. Several silent victims show up at Clovis to remind him daily of the crimes he committed.

In the middle of this violence and loathing, Udaya alias Miss Jebeen the Second emerges as a slight ray of new possibilities. Along with Anjum and her entourage, Tilo ends up in the Jannat Guest House (the graveyard). After Musa's death, the narrator tells us:

Tilo would grieve deeply at Musa's passing, but would not be undone by her grief because she was able to write to him regularly and visit him often enough through the crack in the door that the battered angels in the graveyard held open (illegally) for her. (Roy 437)

In the last section, Dayachand takes his close aides to a mall. So far, the text had been silent on the mall culture of Delhi. But when it does show up, it does so to commemorate Dayachand's father's murder. He tells them:

'This is where he died. Right here. Where this building now stands. Before it came up there were villages here, surrounded by wheat fields. There was a police station... a road...' (Roy, 411)

Tilo, without verbalising her thoughts, thinks: "*Maybe it's the whole world's mazar... Maybe the mannequin shoppers are ghosts trying to buy what no longer exists.*" (Roy 412) Finally,

it's the presence of Udaya Jebeen that entwines several destinies. She has three mothers – Revathy, the raped Communist, Anjum, the maternal hijra and Tilottama, the quiet rescuer. Six policemen, who carried out the brutal gangrape remain faceless and unnamed – the text is silent on this count. Musa's daughter was called Miss Jebeen – a little girl who died at an intersection. Miss Jebeen, the second is the harbinger of a tenuous new beginning. The novel ends with a flicker of hope. Everything "would turn out all right in the end... Because Miss Jebeen, Miss Udaya Jebeen, was come." (Roy 438)

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