

Identity Crisis, Marginalization, and Counter-Memory in the Novels of Arundhati Roy: A Postcolonial Viewpoint

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Abstract: Arundhati Roy frequently explores the themes of identity, marginalization, counter-memory and resistance in her novels. For instance, if one looks at the works like *The God of Small Things* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, there's an observable inquiry into postcolonial subjectivity, encompassing the varied conditions of Indian socio-political realities. In this paper, we place an effort to understand Roy's works and her representation of identity as a flexible construct. Identity in her novels gets shaped by many things, like caste, gender, religion, class, trauma and even historical memory. We shall draw upon theoretical backgrounds pertaining to postcolonialism, feminism, trauma studies and intersectionality, to mainly understand how Roy portrays her characters and communities who are subject to the margins of dominant or oppressive social structures. We shall also investigate the manner in which the author critiques or questions traditional narratives of nationalism. Her novels reflect the difficult lives and experiences of Dalits, women, religious minorities, transgender individuals and other discriminated groups/communities whose voice has often been subdued throughout history. Through a brilliant manner of story-telling and applying innovative narrative techniques, like fragmented temporality and alternative memory, Roy creates a world where marginalized voices/identities can actually be understood and well-articulated.

Keywords: Arundhati Roy, postcolonial identity, hybridity, marginality, memory, caste, gender, trauma, intersectionality, resistance.

1. Introduction

Contemporary literature and cultural studies tend to focus greatly on themes like identity and individuality. We often come across the plight of characters that stand or struggle against traditional social structures, hence highlighting postcolonial discourses that reshape our understanding of identity in the modern world. In this regard, the question of identity has truly become something of immense importance in cultural and literary studies. The fall of monarchy and colonial empires never eliminated social, psychological and cultural outcomes of colonial rule. Communities who gained independence ended up having their own complex histories, characterized by events of displacement, marginalization and fragmentation. So, the postcolonial identity basically emerged as a dynamic area of study, wherein scholars have revisited the knowledge of how communities/individuals accepted colonial legacies along with their indigenous structures of power. Modern theorists stress on the fact that identity is neither a singular nor stable construct, but is fluid and dynamic in nature, shaped by factors mentioned above.

Arundhati Roy foregrounds these ideas, combining literary or narrative innovation with socio-political critique, altogether presenting vivid insights/understandings into the lives of characters that get marginalized and situated outside oppressive power structures. Roy's characters often question the official or conventional narratives of nationhood, progress and social harmony. The author places significant efforts to unearth the profound divisions of patriarchal institutions, caste hierarchies, religious intolerance, economic inequalities and state-driven violence. Her debut novel, *The God of Small Things* explores the dire outcomes of social exclusion through the portrayal of characters who face caste-based discrimination and gender oppression within the cultural landscape of Kerala. The experiences of characters like Ammu, Velutha, Estha and Rahel, brilliantly reveals the mechanisms through which personal desire, identity and belonging is shaped into society. Roy also explores the broader questions of religious conflict, gender diversity, political resistance and national identity in her second novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*.

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It is worth noting that Roy's work is committed to showing lives and identities that exist outside traditionally rigid social structures. Readers can vividly observe characters who reside within liminal spaces, where several forms of exclusion impact their lives. So, Roy's work basically resonates with modern theoretical frameworks that focus on hybridity, intersectionality and cultural memory. Trauma is also another important theme Roy keeps revisiting as it is a direct output of the structures that oppress her characters. She presents how identity formation in postcolonial societies involves more than colonial histories. The experiences of individuals/characters enduring caste, gender, religious and class-based oppression, in unison can be understood as a sharp critique of existing social structures. This paper proceeds to inspect the interconnected themes of hybridity, marginality and memory in Roy's fiction, as vital components that manifest the real postcolonial identity. In other words, we shall dive into the theme of the identity crisis faced by characters in her novels, to understand all the other aforementioned areas/themes.

The Politics of Identity in Arundhati Roy's Fiction

Identity has always been a central theme in Arundhati Roy's works. The formation of one's identity is always a dynamic process, involving social, cultural, political and familial forces that collectively give it an eventual shape. The conflict between individual desire and oppressive social structures is what makes her characters worth studying. Readers can clearly see how her characters struggle to identify themselves amidst caste-based hierarchies and discriminations. Characters are continuously troubled by patriarchal traditions, religious orthodoxies and state-driven violence. The settings and backgrounds applied by her become resonant of modern psychological theories relating to identity formation, especially the ones that state/view identity as a dynamic or evolving construct which is vehemently shaped through social interaction, personal choice and the varied experiences of marginalization. The crises faced by her characters do not stem from internal confusion alone, but also from systemic attempts to regulate and control their lives, much like imposing things without any regard for personal freedom. The bottom line is that Roy portrays identity as inseparable from power, and the quest for identity or selfhood becomes an act of resistance against institutions that seek conformity.

Her Booker Prize-Winning novel, *The God of Small Things*, dives into the complex notions of gender, caste, family and social exclusion, which are all connected to identity formation. In this world, each person has a role and if they do not fit into the role assigned to them, there will be devastating consequences. Women are depicted in an intricate way that emphasizes their reduction as human beings through male-dominated structures. The process by which these structures diminish the identity and position that a woman traditionally holds in society is evident from the experiences that these women have. Ammu represents the most powerful example of the fragmented identity that Roy creates by showing the awareness of her fragmented identity. As a divorced woman in a society that values marriage, she is not able to be classified according to traditional society's expectations of women, and, therefore, her identity and protection under the law as a woman in a patriarchal society were taken from her because of her lack of a socially successful married life. Roy illustrates how patriarchal societies reduce women to the relationship they have with a man, and Ammu is continuously put into a marginalized position because she is not able to fulfil the traditional role of a wife. As a divorced woman, she is denied her inheritance, she is not accepted in society, and she does not have the freedom to make her own decisions. Ammu's relationship with Velutha illustrates this idea of a woman having an assertion of personal agency over how she wishes to define her own identity. However, this act of defining herself and taking action as an independent and self-defined woman is received by the society of the time as an act against society's expectations; thus, the society looks to punish Ammu for taking this action which is outside of her traditional role as a woman.

Other characters like Mammachi also reflect the deeply ingrained nature of gender-based subjugation. She kept on living a life of emotional and physical abuse. She internalized her traumatic experiences and accepted being stuck in a social order that normalizes male authority or dominance. So, Mammachi as a character has accepted an identity that got shaped primarily through decades of internalized subordination. The sociological theory of patriarchal conditioning has illuminated the oppression of women in Indian society, particularly in the lives of women such as Mammachi. It is often said that women who are oppressed by patriarchal systems have been conditioned to accept their oppression as "natural". Mammachi's inability to confront her husband's authority demonstrates the psychological impact of being subject to long-term oppression. The silence Mammachi displays is the result of an identity based on fear, obedience, and social expectation. Rahel's experiences of identity formation differ from that of Mammachi's. Rahel has grown up in an environment where there was instability (emotional), fragmentation (family), and prejudice (social). Because of this, Rahel's identity is not fully formed and, therefore, Rahel is not a "whole" person. For Rahel's identity to be fully formed, her basic relationships, which develop identity, must be intact. The trauma of

Velutha's death and the destruction of her family have left Rahel with deep psychological scars. Roy shows Rahel as a conflicted individual, one who is suspended between memory and reality, and is unable to fully integrate past experiences into a coherent sense of self. Contemporary psychological theories emphasize the importance of narrative continuity in identity formation, and Rahel's fragmented consciousness reflects the difficulties of constructing identity after traumatic loss. Her eventual reunion with Estha, her twin brother, symbolizes an attempt to reclaim a fractured personal history and restore emotional continuity.

Roy brilliantly dives into mythological aspects to articulate the modern understanding of identity formation. She sometimes invokes figures or deities belonging to Indian epics, simply to emphasize upon the continued legacy of patriarchal and normative social structures. Women subordination has always been legitimized through patriarchal settings; even mythological narratives that celebrate female sacrifice and obedience say the same. The author is suggestive of the fact that such innate narratives of culture and tradition tend to influence contemporary attitudes pertaining to gender, ultimately influencing women on how to live their lives. The fact that such narratives or systems still exist basically reveals the cultural foundations of identity formation become hindrances for genuine selfhood within oppressive social frameworks. In her novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Roy examines the varied questions surrounding identity, gender fluidity, political violence, religion and social exclusion. She presents identity as something which is innately unstable. It is somehow same for people/characters who reside beyond the realm of dominant or oppressive social systems/structures, or even outside the dominant category of people who possess social recognition. Roy examines through a diverse cast of characters how identity/identities can be negotiated in contexts defined by violence, depersonalized by violence, and separated from society due to social/geographic exclusion. Through her character of Tilottama, Roy illustrates a rejection of societal norms. Tilottama constantly questions the expectation of others concerning gender, marriage, family, and social conformity. Her identity is driven by movement/flow, ambiguity & autonomy. In the theory of identity from a post-structuralist perspective (as presented by Judith Butler) all stable/socially constructed categories are social constructs; according to Butler, those determinations are nothing more than social constructs and, therefore, are equally invalid. Tilottama demonstrates this view. She refuses to allow her sense of self to be defined by the institutions or relationships she enters into, and therefore, creates her identity from an understanding of herself as being an autonomous/independent thinker. Alternatively, Maryam Ipe, Tilottama's mother, experiences social stigma, social secrecy, and emotional repression. The conflict between her public and private lives has resulted in a fragmented identity and negatively impacts Maryam's life and the relationship she has with her child. Maryam's experiences exemplify the psychological burden that society imposes upon her in order to maintain a socially acceptable identity, while creating a sense of personal identity that ultimately defines her true self.

Hybridity, Memory and Marginalization

Postcolonial theorists used to demonstrate that colonialism wasn't just an economic or political system of development. It was also shaped through various social, cultural and psychological mechanisms, which in unison had gone on to transform the ways in which individuals knew or understood themselves, including their communities. Till date, colonial rule and legacies of the British Raj continue to shape social relations, cultural practices, collective memory and language. A complex notion of postcolonial identity cannot be described merely by returning to an original or authentic pre-colonial self; instead, it is a result of on-going negotiations between history, power, memory and cultural transformation. Arundhati Roy established her own unique relationship to this contemporary landscape with literature. She explores how social identities are formed through the intertwining of various effects created by the historical remnants of colonialism; the social construction of caste hierarchies and patriarchy; the various religious divisions; the processes associated with globalization; and the structural frameworks influenced by state power. Roy challenges the traditional view that identity is a stable or completely unified construct. Through her novels she portrays identity as an outcome of experiences that are fragmented, contested and often built upon gradually. Through the journey of round characters, Roy applies her narrative technique to explore broader themes of belonging, exclusion, resistance and survival. Roy's portrayal of identity can be viewed as embodying an advanced understanding of post-colonial subjectivity. In other words, her literary world transcends binary constructs created as a result of the conflict between colonizers and the colonized. Postcolonial scholarship continues to focus on exploring the myriad complexities involved in forming a unique cultural identity among previously colonized individuals, and now confronts the idea of cultural identity as having been developed through the intersection of multiple and/or interrelated systems of power. The stories told by Roy, as expressed within her fiction, represent the essence of this line of thought by revealing how the development of identity is a very complex process that is shaped by many different variables (including

Identity Crisis, Marginalization, and Counter-Memory in the Novels of Arundhati Roy: A Postcolonial Viewpoint

caste, gender, religion, class, and geographic origins) and then utilizing those variables to create many unique individual identity development experiences among people. Cultural theorists have always argued that colonial experiences become catalysts for the creation of hybrid identities, which in-turn cannot be merely reduced to being essential or socially pure categories. Individual identities are formed through immense and immersive processes of cultural exchange, adaptation, social interaction and negotiation. Roy's fiction repeatedly demonstrates that postcolonial subjects reside within cultural worlds that overlap with each other, instead of being within traditional structures or clearly defined social systems. Readers can vividly observe how her characters tend to navigate frequently between different traditions, social and cultural systems, and eventually forming their identities with fluid and multifaceted factors in the background, instead of anything which is fixed or understood as singular within human society.

In *The God of Small Things*, hybridity manifests through language, family history, social relationships, and cultural memory. The residents of Ayemenem are seen to occupy a social environment which has been shaped over-time by indigenous traditions. There are religious influences, colonial backgrounds and modern aspirations as well. One may also say that their identities are seen as some form of contradiction and ambiguity, something which is definitely not constant or stable. The novel shows a religious and culturally-rooted community that has also absorbed colonial institutions and non-native values. The coexistence of modern principles along with cultural aspects makes it a social landscape where identity becomes a process of negotiation rather than inheritance. Language also plays a tremendous role in the author's representation of hybrid identity. The narrative basically tackles the authority of standardized English by using native or regional patterns of speech, including local expressions and unconventional linguistic structures that would confuse the natives. Colonial languages have been changed from the perspective of representing/expressing upon local experiences, memories and sensibilities. Instead of merely using previously learned forms of linguistic expression/communication, Roy has adapted them to the complex realities of Indian society/culture. The meeting of competing histories and cultures creates a manifestation of identity through translation and transformation through language. The relationship of the twins, Estha and Rahel, to post-colonial identity is one dimensional, with each of their experiences demonstrating how identity (the individual) cannot be separated from memory (past) and historical trauma. Current ideas regarding memory tell us that individual subjectivity is created through one's storytelling/narrative engagements with the past. Memory in Roy's writing does not function to provide individuals with a complete history of themselves; however it is an emotionally charged experience, an on-going process (memory fragments) within which the twins produce their own identities. Due to the limitations placed on the production, distribution and use of language and the fact that the twins have experienced multiple situations that cannot be abstracted from developing their own identity in the context of society's dominant narratives, memory functions as a resistance to official histories that attempt to erase inconvenient truths.

Roy's representation of caste includes the relationship between memory and identity. To better understand this, let us briefly allude to the tragic fate of Velutha. This particular instance shows how social institutions have a control over an individual's place or belonging. Caste ideologies or hierarchies dictated the formation of his identity, simultaneously negating all his personal qualities. Theoretical frameworks in sociology suggest that marginalized communities do not enjoy their complete rights in society. Roy exposes this factor by presenting caste as something that controls the formation or transformation of selfhood/identity. Velutha's exclusion can be seen as a distinct example of how institutions or social systems act as tools of control, ultimately deciding whose identities are to be acknowledged and whose are to be rendered oblivious. The author's representation of these mechanisms, of subjectivity, marginalization and discrimination, takes on a whole new level in her novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. The story goes further beyond regional and familial concerns, to examine and understand the experiences of individuals and marginalized communities, ones located at the very edges of social recognition. Identity, again, is portrayed as a contested/conflicted construct, wherein multiple forms of marginalization and caste-based hierarchies intersect to produce one's accepted social status. Anjum, as a character, provides one of the most powerful narratives relating to identity in today's literature. Anjum exists outside the male and female construction of gender and provides a means of embodying the fluidity and instability of those categories that have been constructed differently. Some noteworthy new theories of gender emphasize that gender is constructed through social performativity, cultural expectations, and lived experiences as opposed to being biologically determined. Roy has represented this idea in Anjum by demonstrating that gender is ever-evolving. The character of Anjum provides a way to examine the limitations of rigid classification, as well as possible forms of alternative self-identity. Of great importance is that Roy has represented Anjum in the context of indigenous cultures rather than only through contemporary Western constructs. The narrative

also illustrates that forms of gender diversity have existed in South Asian cultures for many years, and challenges the assumption that non-binary identities are modern concepts and that the speaking for, or creating of, colonial, nationalist discourses has narrowed the existing forms of gender. Hybridity, as presented in Roy's novels, is then not merely the result of colonialism, but is also a return of traditional cultural possibilities.

Understanding Trauma and Counter-Memory

Arundhati Roy challenges celebratory narratives of postcolonial nationhood by exposing the sustained existence of exclusionary structures in contemporary India. Traditional notions in a modern world create vivid gaps or distortion that go on to affect individual freedom and the formation of selfhood. Roy does not conclude her vision with a celebratory remark, like portraying Indian independence as the only stark culmination of liberation. Rather, she reflects the manner in which religious prejudice, caste hierarchy, gender inequality and state-driven violence survive within the postcolonial nation. Her exploration of themes like marginality demonstrates that freedom, democracy and social justice remain inaccessible to many individuals/communities, whose lives are still affected by exclusion, discrimination, hierarchies and other institutionalized forms of oppression. As discussed briefly above, the character of Velutha is a victim of such traditional and colonial legacies. Even if he displayed immense intelligence and technical skills, he still wasn't recognized or acknowledged with a legitimate status because of his caste. Through such a representation, Roy presents a striking paradox, of a society that is heavily dependent on manual labour, knowledge and contributions of marginalized/working communities, while simultaneously denying equal rights and social acknowledgement to them. Structural exclusion is the peril that affects the lives of characters like Velutha and other communities/individuals having similar identities. Modern theory states that inequality is maintained not merely through economic disparities, but also through symbolic systems that normalize privilege and disadvantage. Velutha's exclusion is therefore not accidental or individual, rather it is innately institutional. These representations vividly show how caste, prejudice, discrimination and exclusion still continue to shape social relations, even long after the end of colonial rule.

Ammu and Velutha's relationship challenges established social norms and their bond is seen as moving beyond what society regards as unbreakable barriers. Roy illustrates that this relationship is more than romantic love; it challenges the entrenched systems of power in place. The resultant violence illustrates how social hierarchies protect themselves and the collaborative nature of the state, family, and community in maintaining the caste system by demonstrating how personal relationships can become public within a society where intimacy is dictated by systems of privilege and inequality. Through her female characters' repeated confrontations with social structures that limit autonomy and define women as dependent on men, Roy asserts the validity of feminist theory's assertion that patriarchal value systems define female identity as dependent, domestic, and obedient. Roy's works provide readers with literary examples of these systems while at the same time illustrating the varied means by which women resist these systems. Ammu personifies the vulnerability of women existing outside 'acceptable' societal roles. After her marriage fails, she loses her financial stability, her social position, and her family support. The experiences of Mammachi can also be accounted for in similar contexts, altogether highlighting the complexities of gendered oppression. Although she displays skills for entrepreneurship and contributes significantly to her family's economic success, she still remains under male authority, not realizing full freedom and trapped within both domestic and social spheres. The limitations of economic empowerment can be seen through the portrayal of Mammachi, wherein cultural structures continue to privilege masculine authority. This takes us to an important insight of modern feminist theory: physical or material achievement cannot solely guarantee liberation if power relations and society's normative structures remain unchallenged or unchanged.

Conclusion

Arundhati Roy's contribution to the world of literature is exemplary and noteworthy. Her works, collectively, are one of the most significant literary explorations of postcolonial identity in contemporary Indian literature. Her novels, *The God of Small Things* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, explore the concept of selfhood and identity formation within traditional social systems. She understands it as a complex and evolving process, one that is primarily shaped by several factors, like historical memory, social exclusion, political conflict and cultural negotiation. Her novels go on to challenge the rigid or simplistic understandings of identity, as we have already discussed above. Our brief analysis here revealed that hybridity and dynamic nature tends to function as a central feature of Roy's literary imagination. Her characters go through profound journeys that overlap cultural, social and contradictory ideological worlds. They are seen to resist any fixed notion, classifications or singular definition. Roy presents identity not as a stable or pre-defined construct, but a fluid construct bearing a relational nature. This very perspective

Identity Crisis, Marginalization, and Counter-Memory in the Novels of Arundhati Roy: A Postcolonial Viewpoint

enables the author to contest existing structures of oppression, marginalization and exclusion. Her imagination is critical of caste, gender, religion and nationality, altogether highlighting the creative possibilities that emerge from cultural plurality and social complexity.

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