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Tracing Feminist Waves in Arundhati Roy's Novels Through Beauvoirian and Cixousian Approaches

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Abstract:

This research paper examines Arundhati Roy's novels and feminism, using the theories of Helene Cixous and Simon de Beauvoir. Cixous and de Beauvoir's theories are relevant in understanding contemporary feminist issues, addressing patriarchal structures, and promoting global gender equality through activism and media representation. The 1990s saw a postmodern shift in feminist thought, leading to Third-Wave feminism, which sought to be traced in Roy's novels. However, scholars have debated that a new wave of feminism has arrived since 2012 and is characterized by social media activism and radical individualism in the women's world. Roy's second fiction, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, was published in 2017, 20 years after her first novel, *The God of Small Things*. Roy has only published two works of fiction throughout her career. Her first novel, *The God of Small Things*, falls within the Third-Wave feminism era, while her second, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, falls within the Fourth-Wave feminism era. The study aims to evaluate Roy's novels on the spectrum of these two waves of feminism and sketch the definition and parameters of these distinct waves. By examining Roy's novels about feminism, the paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of her writings and the broader feminist movement.

Keywords: Feminism, Third-wave Feminism, Beauvoirian, Cixousian, Fourth-wave Feminism, Neoliberalism, Intersection, Transgender, Bourgeoisie Feminism, Colonial Hegemony, Third-Space.

INTRODUCTION

Culture, society, and symbolic systems like art, religion, and language all reveal similar schemes, creating a universal battlefield where oppositions are set up, revealing death's constant presence, “A universal battlefield. Each time, a war is let loose” (Cixous 1986, p.349). Mardiyani, & Tawami (2022) argue that gender inequality refers to the social and cultural differences between men and women, often due to the patriarchal system. Feminism, a social movement, seeks equality by addressing these inequalities, and significantly, “Gender and feminism are some of the social issues that can appear in novels” (p.166)

Arundhati Roy begins writing in Neoliberal India but, relics of the colonial past are reflected in her work. Her debut novel, *The God of Small Things*, was published in 1997, for which she won the Booker Prize. Gómez (2019) sketches, Roy's work, which explores power relations and gender roles in postcolonial India, focusing on the influence of colonialism on traditions and views. She frames her work in the context of postcolonial India, addressing issues of class, race, gender, and culture, and the ‘interconnections between them’ (p.8). Arundhati Roy very deftly deals with women's concerns and cultural contradictions in her novel, as Mardiyani & Tawami (2022) remarkably conclude, *The God of Small Things* highlights subordination, marginalization, and violence as forms of gender inequality, highlighting the need for feminism to promote a balanced environment between men and women, respecting and caring for each other, “God creates humans with advantages and disadvantages in each gender, better to respect and care for each other” (p.173). The novel is successful to an extent in showing how many sections of society are deprived of their rights based on gender biases that are nothing but social constructs. It affirms the Beauvoirian notion that “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (Beauvoir 1949/2011, p.283).

Twenty years later, in 2017, Roy published her second novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, when the fourth wave of feminism was making its way. Written and embroidered in the 21st-century neoliberal world, this work reestablishes the Cixous notion of feminism with contemporary taste and tone. This novel can be said to be a postmodernist interpretation of the Indian scenario, since Gopinath (2019) established that Foucault's heterotopias are subversive spaces that juxtapose multiple incompatible sites in a single place, like a cemetery. They are typical in postmodern worlds, “where fragmented individuals occupy carceral cityspaces” (p.3). *The*

Ministry of Utmost Happiness revolves around the eunuch Anjum. It deals more specifically with gender-related issues since Cixous (1986) notably argues that philosophy often associates women with passivity, excluding them from kinship structures and family models. Mallarme's tragic dream of father-son marriage highlights this, as a man's dream of death threatens him differently than a woman (349). *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* successfully portrays social and cultural tension based on gender conflict. Tilottama, the narrating voice of the novel, is a sufferer of being a woman with a unique identity, "Tilo, who was raised in an enigmatic household with no established social standing" (Medhavi 2024, p.215). Her mother is a Syrian Christian from Kerala, and her father belongs to an untouchable caste. Tilottama's predicament intersects with society many times.

Thus, the research study examines Arundhati Roy's novels *The God of Small Things* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* through the lens of second and fourth-wave feminism to understand not only women's position but also the societal evolution since "Anybody who knows anything of history knows that great social changes are impossible without the feminine ferment" (Marx 1868/1968, para.3). *The God of Small Things* explores the societal structures that define women's lives, using de Beauvoir's concept of "the Other" to highlight the marginalization and objectification of women within a patriarchal framework and exemplify Second-wave. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, a fourth-wave feminism novel, uses Cixous's concept to trace the contours of fourth-wave feminism. The diverse cast of characters exemplifies the inclusivity and intersectionality central to fourth-wave feminism. The comparative analysis of Roy's novels reveals the evolving discourse of feminist theory and the transformative power of literature in feminist activism.

Theoretical Framework

This feminist analysis of Arundhati Roy's novels, *The God of Small Things* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, uses the theoretical frameworks drawn from the works of Simone de Beauvoir and Hélène Cixous, both prominent figures in second-wave feminism. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) is a foundational work in second-wave feminism, emphasizing the systemic structures of patriarchy that subjugate women, "With the advent of patriarchy, the male resolutely claimed his posterity; the mother had to be granted a role in procreation" (Beauvoir 1949/2011, p.35). In *The God of Small Things*, female characters navigate a patriarchal society,

highlighting gender inequality and the subordination of women. This critique aligns with Beauvoir's critique of the pervasive patriarchal order and the existential plight of women.

Hélène Cixous's contributions extend the analysis in the realms of fluidity and intersectionality that characterize fourth-wave feminism. Cixous's concept of “écriture féminine” advocates for the expression of women's experiences and identities outside the constraints of phallogocentric discourse, “it has become rather urgent to question this solidarity between logocentrism and phallogocentrism - bringing to light the fate dealt to woman” (Cixous 1986, p.350). This perspective is particularly relevant in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, which embodies a more inclusive and intersectional approach to feminism, featuring a diverse cast of characters, including transgender individuals and those from marginalized communities.

Cixous's work is rooted in second-wave feminist thought but also exemplifies tenets of fourth-wave feminism, such as intersectionality and queering of sexuality, described in her work *Newly Born Women* (1986), which provides the theoretical background for this study. Her focus on the interconnectedness of gender, race, and other social categories aligns with the fourth wave's focus on addressing identity and social justice complexities. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* exemplifies this intersectional approach, portraying characters like Anjum and Tilottama at the intersection of multiple axes of identity and oppression. These characters' experiences highlight the fluid and multifaceted nature of contemporary feminist issues, echoing Cixous's call for a more inclusive and diverse feminist praxis.

The evolution of feminism from the second to the fourth wave highlights the fluidity of feminist theory. Medhavi (2024) commented, “Roy's activism primarily addresses social injustices, her critiques frequently go beyond the scope of social discourse, resonating politically and calling attention to structural inequities and neoliberal circumstances that perpetuate marginalization” (p.216) thus, her novels, written at different times and reflecting different feminist waves, provide a rich textual landscape to explore this evolution. *The God of Small Things* aligns more closely with second-wave concerns about systemic patriarchy and gender oppression. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* reflects the fourth wave's inclusivity and intersectionality, addressing a broader spectrum of identities and social issues.

Bourgeoisie feminism of The God of Small Things

Beauvoir (1949/2011) ascertained that “woman has always been man’s dependent if not his slave; the two sexes have never shared the world in equality” (20), fundamentally describing second-wave feminism. But Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* was written and published when third-wave feminism was being chanted. That's why it should be analyzed to what extent Arundhati Roy addresses the problems related to feminist intersections. It is perfectly visible that *The God of Small Things* is a novel of an oppressed section in which the oppressed voices like the postcolonial population, Dalit, and women-related problems firmly register their presence, as Medhavi & Sahay (2023) commented, “The novel critiques traditional hierarchies like caste, class, and patriarchy, highlighting the suffering they inflict on individuals. By centering the narrative around marginalized communities and their struggles, Roy aligns with the New Left's concern for social justice and emancipation” (2097). For example, Velutha, the protagonist of the story, is a Dalit. We see a very mature depiction of Dalit marginalization, whose plight is in the novel. Arundhati Roy successfully portrays the intersecting nature of marginalization like Dalit-related issues. She gives a lot of space to Dalit-related problems in her plot. But when we study the problems related to women in *The God of Small Things*, then we see the problems related to women are Beauvoirian in nature, which characterizes the second wave of feminism, as Ashraf (2022) asserted that in *The God of Small Things*, Ammu and Mammachi are victims of a male-dominated society, forced to wait for marriage due to their father's view of education. Ammu dreams of escaping, but her husband's alcoholism suspension leads to her violent behavior, and “she had no alternative but to break off and come back with her twins” (p.8).

Ammu, the heroine of the novel, is oppressed on many levels. Her character is crying out about the plight of women. However, we do not find any major depiction of women who are healing from another marginalized section. However, the plot revolves around a Dalit, but it is quite evident that no major depiction of Dalit women is presented potentially in the novel. Women's issues are highlighted only from an elite perspective. The plot explores the unconscious mind of women, especially from a bourgeoisie perspective, arguing that writing is not like men because women speak with the body and that Western discourse presents an isomorphism with masculine sex. The predicaments of Mamachi, Ammu, and even of baby Kochamma are the pictures of women that address the upper layer. Therefore, it can be asserted that the feminism

portrayed in this novel is more akin to liberal or bourgeoisie feminism. Ammu, as Rahel's mother, does not give her a surname, "Rahel's was Rahel. For the Time Being, they had no surname because Ammu was considering reverting to her maiden name, though she said that choosing between her husband's name and her father's name didn't give a woman much of a choice." (Roy 1997, p.36- 37) as it does not change the situation or make her equal to the man; thus, it is established that "women are powerless to choose what will benefit to them" (Mardiyani & Tawami 2022, p.171). Further, Pappachi, Ammu's father, tradition-bound, feels that being married is more essential than going to college and that a girl doesn't need to attend one, "Pappachi insisted that a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl, so Ammu had no choice but to leave Delhi and move with them" (Roy 1997, p.38). Traditions and religion play a crucial role in assigning traditional gender roles to women, such as motherhood and housekeeping. Women must uphold family honor and live upright lives. Ammu's character highlights the importance of learning about housekeeping despite her aspiration to marry (Gomez 2019, p.46). This illustration firmly establishes Roy in line with Beauvoirian feminism, as famously quoted, "Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society" (Beauvoir 1949/2011, p.455).

The God of Small Things is authentically feminine, with phonological, morphological, and syntactic structures and spelling liberty reinforcing its feminist quality. The novel demonstrates the critical features of the woman's language, such as spellings and phonological features, reflecting feminine sensibility. The reactions of characters like Baby Kochamma and Mammachi reflect the feminine sensibility of the novel, as Ashraf (2022) rightly affirmed: "In fact, in feminine sensibility, as reflected in the reactions of Baby Kochamma, Mammachi, or the female visitors who came to see Ammu after she had returned to Ayemenem as a divorcee, divorce is, at least metaphorically, a form of death" (p.9). Baby Kochamma held that a married daughter had no position in her parents' home, divorced daughter had no position, and divorced daughter from a love marriage was outraged and silent, "she had no position anywhere at all. And as for a divorced daughter from a love marriage, well, words could not describe Baby Kochamma's outrage" (Roy 1997, p.45). Additionally, Ammu treats her brother Chacko differently because of his higher education and ability to be distinctive, "Chacko had been a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford ...eccentricities nobody else was... Ammu said that there was only one person in the family who was fit..., and that was Chacko himself" (Roy, 1997: 38). These subordinations are linked to liberal

feminism, another subset of the second wave, which believes women should have the same rights as men, including the right to give their last name.

Third Space Feminism and The Ministry of Utmost Happiness

Gopinath (2019) argues that the novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, delves into the concept of third space, a social discourse that reflects caste hierarchies, gender inequalities, and oppression in postcolonial Indian society, since “In the context of third spaces, spaces are fluid and blend materiality with the world of the ephemeral” (p.4) *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* presents a quantum phenomenon in the feminist universe. Various intersections can be traced out on the Canvas of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Tilottama is born twice cast. Her mother is Syrian Christian and her father is an untouchable Dalit. Because of her parents’ status Biplav, Dasgupta's parents reject her and state “I love her without pride. And without hope....., my Brahmin parents, would never accept her- the girl without past, without a caste- into the family” (Roy 2017, p.161). Despite all of these, Tilo continued her fight against the system. Thus, Tilo proved herself as a silent revolutionist and a groundbreaker.

Comrade Revathy is another character who presents a picture of intersecting feminism. She is a low-caste woman (Roy 2017, p.418). Gopinath (2019) further credits that, the story of Miss Jabeen's mother, Comrade Revathy, highlights the unheard and unaddressed violence against poor women in backward communities. (p.8) In government college, she is radicalized by Maoist Communists and dedicates her entire life to the Communist cause, “I became influenced by Communism and revolutionary thinking” (Roy 2017, p.420). One day, she is captured by police, and raped and tortured, “I was captured in Kudur village. I was dressed in sari... I could not fight... They all raped me many times” (p.422-423). She escapes but realizes that she is pregnant, “After three months I could walk. By then I was pregnant” (p.425) which devastates her. When she delivered her child miss Jaibeen the Second, she was disabled enough to abandoned her outside Jantar Mantar. Mitra (2021) indicts Revathy's rape highlights her hatred for a child, rooted in fascist culture, and her desire to avoid contact, resulting in violence against women of minorities (p.162). The torture and sufferings of comrade Revathy highlight the cruel socio-political reality. Revathy was tortured and raped by the representatives of the establishment. She was raped by police, which unfolds cruel discrimination of intersectional women.

Cixous (1986) pointed out, that sexual difference is a complex issue in cultural determinations, constantly evolving. Radical transformations in behaviors, mentalities, roles, and political economy could liberate sexuality, requiring radical political changes, and altering "femininity" and "masculine" identities (350). Loveleen Singh, wife of Major Amrik Singh, was born into an impoverished Sikh family that was more than happy to marry her off to a successful army man. Loveleen experiences extensive domestic abuse, "I feel like a crazy woman. I often react dramatically to yelling and loud noises" (Roy 2017, p.201). Once granted asylum in California, Major Amrik Singh murders Loveleen and their three children (200). The story of Loveleen Singh and Major Amrik Singh is not only a sketch of women's persecution. This draws a picture of gender conflict in not only domestic purview but as a socio-political construct that creates women's persecutions that reflect contemporary feminist concerns. The brutal psyche of Amrik Singh portrays the harsh detachment of counter sex, which indicates the interlocking of the power relationship between men and women, as the psycho-social evaluation of Amerik Singh and his wife reveals the unjust socio-political conditions that brought such traumatic disorder to couples, "Mrs. Loveleen Singh and Mr. Amrik Singh both suffer from severe Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. This degree of stress is definitely indicative of individuals that have suffered destructive and traumatic events..." (p.203). That is one of the major tenets of the fourth wave of feminism.

Anjum, a transgender, has been supported by her family from the beginning but she feels that she is not given the freedom that she needs at the same time. Talwar (2020) affirms that Roy's novel, tells the story of a transgender woman who navigates the 'Light and Sound Show' at the Red Fort, observing the presence of her community in the city's history, "The narrative creates a fascinating juxtaposition of New and Old Delhi" (p.262). She moves to the Khwabgah, a space where she undergoes her transition from Aftab to Anjum, amidst the marginalized Muslim neighborhood. Cixous (1986) suggests a revaluation of bisexuality, distinguishing between two bisexualities: "Two within one, and not even two wholes," one focusing on a complete being and another on both sexes within oneself (351); Anjum loves to live life as a girl like other Hijras in the city, "Anjum was finally able to dress in the clothes she longed to wear- the sequined, gossamer kurta and pleated Patiala salwar, shararas, ghararas, silver anklet, glass bangles, and dangling earrings" (Roy 2017, p.26). She stands as a bridge between the ones who are like her to society and others who talk badly about them. Anjum escapes from the 'Duniya' (world) to take shelter in

a graveyard, assuming that since there is no place in the 'Duniya' for her to belong to, she better create her own ministry of happiness', subsuming all who need solace and satisfaction amidst scarcity and poverty since "Anjum's house slowly becomes a haven for all kinds of precarious beings living on the edge or having experienced jumping off a cliff" (Talwar 2020, p.263). Anjum is the representation of the third space, and here Medhavi (2024) rightly ascertained that The Ministry of Utmost Happiness, a creation by a woman, reflects the marginalization faced by individuals at the intersection of gender identification and cultural norms, highlighting their desire for "safety and unity" (p.213). The strong presence of Anjum in the fiction and her emotional experiences that stream through the plot of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is the advocacy of the third gender and space. This makes this fiction a potent exponent of fourth-wave feminism.

Conclusion: A Quantum Jump in Arundhati Roy's Feminist Universe.

Women are not only important but quite an essential part of human civilization and society. That society or community is undoubtedly sick and rotting, where women are oppressed, hence, Mitra (2021) concluded *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is a novel that presents women's counter-narratives against fascist state structures, challenging traditional narratives about community, gender, caste, and ethnicity (p.163). The history of human civilization is also the history of women's empowerment, parallelly. Marx (1868/1968) said "Social progress can be measured by social position given to the female sex ugly one included" (para. 3) Concluding from this point of view, we see that Arundhati Roy's first novel *The God of Small Things* shows feminism, but its feminism seems limited to a certain section, especially elite class. Despite showing the exploited class, this novel fails to address the women of the exploited class. Yet *The God of Small Things* represents feminism. The problems related to women depicted in it are real. We can see the problems related to women raised in this novel by linking them to the second wave of feminism, where we can see the impact of the psychological repression and grand narrative hegemony of the colonial period as significantly quoted, "*The God of Small Things* is a memorial reconstruction of the past through feminine sensibility" (Ashraf 2022, p.9). To conclude briefly, it can be asserted that there is an absence of third-wave feminism in *The God of Small Things*. On the other side, Gender plays an important role in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Thus, the Politics of Gender is considered as the primary way through which one person is identified and evaluated by society, "In Arundhati Roy's works, a subtle alignment with

New Left ideas and Postmodernist micropolitics becomes apparent” (Medhavi & Sahay 2023, p.2099). The novel tries to bring up the sufferings and lives of different people in a society. So, the portrayal of gender identity at many individual levels in the second novel of Arundhati Roy synchronizes her in the row of feminists of the fourth wave.

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