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**Subaltern Strategic Essentialism in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness***

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**Abstract:** India is a cacophony of subaltern voices but seldom heard, often being the first casualties the moment the country is hit by a crisis. These are groups whose lives are made precarious by the prejudices of the dominant class. Additionally, there are oppositions within the subaltern where one group is opposed to another. The result: they are used as pawns by those in power for political gains. Can there be a solution to this vicious cycle of discrimination and oppression? Can these varied subaltern groups come together for the amelioration of all? This paper aims to analyse the Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* in the context of strategic essentialism of the subaltern as propounded by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in the essay *Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography* and an interview *Practical Politics of the Open End*. The paper employs close reading and application of post-colonial theory to show how diverse subaltern groups ought to come together to achieve their common good. People's movement initiatives and activism can largely benefit by paying heed to this message constructed by Gayatri and infused with a soul by Arundhati.

**Keywords:** Subaltern, strategic essentialism, Dalit, Kashmir, Transgender, Adivasi

## Introduction

The subaltern is always at the receiving end. In May 2026, the Supreme Court of India in *Gunjan Kumari and Others v. State (NCT of Delhi) and Another* held that it does not constitute an offence under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 if the abuse, insult, or intimidation to humiliate a member of a Scheduled Caste (SC) or a Scheduled Tribe (ST) does not take place in public view (20). In April 2026, Odisha’s Konda tribals were brutalized by the police when protesting against Bauxite mining (Mohanty) and in May 2026 the Odisha judiciary was criticized by the Supreme Court for an “odious” bail condition -- cleaning the premises of a police station -- imposed on SC and ST individuals involved in the protest terming such a condition as “caste-coloured” (In re: Condition). In March 2026, the Parliament passed an amendment to the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019 which reduced the definition clause for the term ‘Transgender’ and legislatively withdrew the fundamental right of a person to self-determination of gender (PRS). In 2024, Human Rights Watch reported arbitrary detention, threats, and violence in Jammu, Kashmir, and Ladakh (India: Events of 2024). The National Crime Records Bureau reported a negligible decrease in crime against women for 2024, while crime against children increased by 5.9% (Jain). Although widely reported, the official NCRB report was unavailable at the time of writing this paper.

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (TMOUH), Arundhati Roy weaves together various narratives from the margin into one crochet of resistance. A short note on Roy’s prowess and style as a writer is worth mentioning. Her crude use of verse as a form of protest against the State is blunt and humorous. At Jantar Mantar, Delhi, the public toilet billboard displayed the words:

“Chheen li tumne garib ki rozi roti  
 Aur laga diye hain fees karne pe tatti  
 You’ve snatched poor folks’ daily bread  
 And slapped a fee on their shit instead” (Roy 112).

When the police ruffle Dr. Azad Bhartiya and take away his protest material, he says:

“Mar gayee bulbul qafas mein  
 Keh gayee sayyaad se  
 Apni sunehri gaand mein  
 Tu thoons le fasl-e-bahaar  
 She died in her cage, the little bird,  
 These words she left for her captor—

Please take the spring harvest  
And shove it up your gilded arse” (Roy 133).

Subaltern pain is effectively captured and resonates like an echo through a valley. At Miss Jebeen’s funeral, a woman cries out:

“Ro rahi hai yeh zameen! Ro raha hai asmaan ...” Another joined in and then another: “This earth, she weeps! The heavens too ...” (Roy 328).

The novel can be described as semi-fiction, semi-autobiographical fiction, and political fiction. In an interview on Democracy Now!, the author admits that during the Jantar Mantar protests she came across a baby (Full Extended..., 18:20 - 18:30). Does this mean she’s Tilo? Roy does not provide clarity. At times she answers in the negative and there are times she describes Tilo in ways that convince her readers that Tilo is more or less the author; she refers to Tilo as “strange”, “strong”, and “a little bit on the edge of crazy ” (30:00 - 33:08) likely revealing to a considerable extent her own true nature.

This paper will analyse the novel so as to foreground the concept of strategic essentialism put forth by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her essay *Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography* (1985) and further commented upon in the interview *Practical Politics of the Open End* conducted by Sarah Harasym in 1987. Through a close reading of the text and the application of Spivak’s post-colonial theory, this discussion will demonstrate how varied subaltern groups can unite to establish a common good for all involved.

## Literature Review

Let us briefly examine existing scholarship on the text under consideration which have used a similar theoretical framework. First, we will explore the connotations of the word “Happiness” in the title of the text based on Al-Ghazali’s *The Alchemy of Happiness*. Second, we will attempt to understand how gender equality can be achieved through collective consciousness as depicted in the text. In the last discourse, we will view the text through Derrida’s hauntological lens. These discussions will assist in establishing the significance and need of the current study.

Jadoon (1-2) rightly points out that intellectual engagements with TMOUH has been evasive in reference to the importance of happiness. However, her analysis falls short of proving the thesis i.e., the Ghazalian philosophy brings about the “communal happiness” that we see in the text with the coming together of various identities: Transgender, Dalit, Muslim, Adivasi, and the female sex (1, 3). Al-Ghazali proposed that the purpose of his alchemy is the purging of inner flaws, to achieve a

spiritual proximity to God, and to attain the knowledge of God (Jalili and Ulfa 34-35). This is sufficiently substantiated for Anjum in the peace she makes with her name (6), her experience in the Gujarat riots (8), and the MMS of the rooster (9).

Jahan and Rahman argue that Durkheim's collective consciousness can be a channel to promote a common cause and as a response to gender inequality (180). Roy portrays a world which is genderless and egalitarian (183). We see this unfold in the denouement of the text from chapters 10 to 12 (Roy). The misogyny in Indian society is amply sketched in the text, whether it be through the use of invectives or the suggestion of casual physical violence (184). The authors assert that certain theories are complementary to that of Durkheim's: Heilburn's androgyny and Cixous's gendered language (185).

Mir's hauntological reading against the grain shows how Roy's spectral characters unite despite their diverse social background (49). For this study, the focus is on living and present characters such as Anjum, Tilo, Saddam, and Musa as opposed to Derrida's use of the deceased King Hamlet (49). These characters unite in the graveyard to form an "alternative Indian social consciousness" (56, 63-64). I propose that the application of hauntology would better suit spectral minor characters in the text: Saddam's father who was a victim of cow vigilantism (Roy, 88-89), Tilo's mother who grew senile and obsessed about caste in her final days at the hospital (241-254), Miss Udaya Jebeen's mother Revathy who was sexually abused by police personnel (417-427), Aftab's intersexuality which haunted their parents (7-29), and Musa's daughter, Miss Jebeen and his wife, Arifa who were inadvertently shot by Indian soldiers (323-324). This can be termed as subaltern hauntology.

A perusal of the above discussions make it clear that the application of strategic essentialism as posited by Spivak to the text under consideration remains unexplored.

### **Subaltern Identities in the Novel**

Anjum is an intersex and transgender individual, born and christened as Aftab. Personally, they consider themselves non-binary/gender-fluid:

“It doesn't matter. I'm all of them, I'm Romi and Juli, I'm Laila and Majnu. And Mujna, why not? Who says my name is Anjum? I'm not Anjum, I'm Anjuman. I'm a *mehfil*, I'm a gathering” (Roy 4).

Society ridicules the transgender community/the subaltern as depicted below:

When she first moved in, she endured months of casual cruelty like a tree would – without flinching. She didn't turn to see which small boy had thrown a stone at her, didn't crane her neck to read the insults scratched into her bark. When people called her

names –clown without a circus, queen without a palace –she let the hurt blow through her branches like a breeze and used the music of her rustling leaves as balm to ease the pain. (3)

Anjum responds to such uncultured behaviour with grace and silence. They are not perturbed by the foulness of society; perhaps left benumbed by past cruelties. The transgender is misrepresented to such an extent that even their mothers are petrified by their trans child's sex and gender (7-9). Jahanara, Anjum's mother, entreats to Hazrat Sarmad to teach her how to love her own child (11). The lack of non-binary narratives for queer children is highlighted when Aftab's father tells them the story of Temujin and they dream of being Borte Khatun, the female protagonist instead of Temujin (17). Such an approach to education especially in educational institutions leads to a limited understanding of gender which promotes prejudice and leaves queer pupils isolated and disconnected from their peers. Razia, a cross-dresser and member of the Khawbgah doesn't wish to be considered as a woman. She feels misunderstood by all including the Hijras (22). Ustad Kulsoom Bi introduced her fellow Hijras to their history in the Sound and Light show at the Red Fort. It was the chuckle of a eunuch which lasted for a "heartbeat" (50-51). She critiqued the representation of the *Kinner* in the Ramayana: "So we are remembered as the forgotten ones?" Ustad Kulsoom Bi said. 'Wah! Wah!'" (51). Roy makes a feeble attempt to represent the transman although in brackets (53).

Saddam, formerly Dayachand, is a Dalit and for a brief period worked as a cleaner in a mortuary where he had become a sort of a surgeon because the Hindu doctors would not touch the cadavers lest they'd get themselves polluted (72-73). Although he changes his religion, prevailing caste sensibilities continue to haunt him. He is fired from his position from Safe n' Sound after he started sporting sunglasses for medical reasons and it looked inappropriate for a security guard (77). Sunglasses are considered suitable for a guard of a higher social stratification just as a Dalit groom in a casteist setting is not expected to ride a horse during his *baraat* (marriage procession). He lost his father to cow vigilantism when they fell prey to a Station House Officer's ruse because they couldn't pay his cut necessary to carry on their vocation as a community that dealt with cow carcasses (86-89). Tilo is a child born out of wedlock; her mother belongs to the upper caste, while her father was an Untouchable (155). Biplab Dasgupta does not pursue Tilo because of his Brahmin background (161). Sepoy S. Murugesan, a Dalit, died two deaths; the first when he was killed in Kupwara, Jammu and Kashmir, and the second when the arms and head of his statue built by the army were decapitated, and despite a protest, the perpetrators were not brought to book (316-319). While the first death was in the line of duty, the second death was instituted by the dominant class, an epistemic assault on Dalit history. The subaltern is killed twice.

Musa, a Kashmiri Muslim, speaks of this second death: “How can they kill me again?” he would say if he sensed worry on Tilo’s part. ‘You’ve already been to my funeral. You’ve already laid flowers on my grave’ (268). The army had raided the houseboat which housed Gulrez, Musa, and Tilo. Musa escaped without detection, but the army took Gulrez into custody and killed him, declaring that Musa (also known as Commander Gulrez) was finally neutralized (365, 375, 378). The pain of the subaltern is recorded in a song scribbled by Musa across the back of an airline ticket:

“Dark to light and light to dark  
 Three black carriages, three white carts,  
 What brings us together is what pulls us apart,  
 Gone our brother, gone our heart.” (267)

He is perhaps mourning for the death of Arifa, Miss Jebeen, and Gulrez.

Musa does get killed again in his *Asal boot*, without an identity, and is buried in an unnamed grave (437). Ashfaq Mir, a police officer and a former Kashmiri separatist (221), proudly presented to Tilo, a milton (militant) boy, Aijaz, who had a deformed leg, a plastered arm, and a bandaged neck (223). The milton subdued his expression of pain as a form of protest in defeat, absolutely indifferent to his surrounding (223). Ashfaq refers to boys like Aijaz as “brainwashed, indoctrinated” and that “They don’t know what they want” (224). The subaltern is supplied with a false agency (Spivak, CSS, 93). It is in Ashfaq’s absence, that the boy reveals how he was tortured and forced to sign a blank sheet, that he had willingly joined the militancy (227), that the Indian army didn’t want the conflict to cease but rather promotes it (228). He concludes thus: “I wanted to kill the murderers of my people. Is that wrong?” (228). Roy presents State brutality against Kashmiris through narrative and police records (281, 290-291). In such an oppressive environment, the burial of their dead became an act of defiance (311). The author adroitly personifies Martyrdom to further elaborate the viciousness of the State (313).

S.Tilottama, Revathy, Miss Jebeen, and Miss Udaya Jebeen are doubly subalterned. Firstly by their sex and secondly by their status as a Dalit (Tilo and Revathy) (155, 419), Kashmiri Muslim (Miss Jebeen), and an abandoned child conceived through rape (Udaya). Tilo’s caste gnaws at her soul evinced by the fact that she picked and smashed a chair in the hospital when her mother uttered a casteist profanity (252). Revathy is similarly circumstanced, born in the backward caste of Settibaliya in Andhra Pradesh, she is considered an untouchable due to her dark skin colour (419). She is a Maoist and works closely with Adivasi resistance against the State to protect the forests; Roy uses

Revathy to emphasize the Adivasi perspective (421). She was abducted and sexually assaulted by six policemen; Udaya was a result of the assault (422-423). When she escaped and reached her party comrades, she was assigned duties despite her precarious condition; her wounds had become septic (424). Udaya's vulnerability in a society which bullies the weak increased manifold when Revathy decided to abandon her child at Jantar Mantar, Delhi to focus on her party responsibilities (425-426). Miss Jebeen and her mother Arifa were killed by a single bullet first passing through the former and settling in the latter's heart; the wound on Miss Jebeen's head resembled "a cheerful summer rose" (310, 323-324).

### Representation and Strategic Essentialism

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak exposes the problem of representation faced by the subaltern in her seminal work *Can the Subaltern Speak?* A group needs the "feeling of community" to engender class consciousness which is a "national link" as opposed to the link we see in a family (72). A subaltern group is unable to represent itself (73). This is further aggravated by misrepresentation of the group by the dominant class. The former is supplied with false agency by the latter: "The women (*satis*) actually wanted to die" (93). Names of *satis* were erroneously recorded; Garland, Ray Queen, and Echo were most likely *satis* named *Mala, Roshan Rani, and Goonj* (93, 101-102).

In *Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography*, Spivak refer to consciousness as a "historicized political species" (11). Subaltern consciousness will always be incomplete because it derives considerably from the elite perspective (11-12). This is termed "negative consciousness", forever irrecoverable, and a form of "rebel consciousness" (12). This rebellion, one must read from the reactions (reports, judgements, laws, etc) of the dominant class towards the resistance offered by the subaltern (12-13). The subaltern is neither meek nor completely weak. It is here that Spivak propounds about strategic essentialism. Relying on negative/rebel consciousness as a unified and fixed consciousness of the subaltern is an essentialist approach. However, Spivak finds no issue with this approach and formulates it as the "strategic use of positivist essentialism" to ascertain subaltern consciousness towards a "scrupulously visible political interest" (11, 13). Spivak's intent is not to provide us a theory to decipher the truth of the subaltern, but a careful and calculated glimpse into the subaltern (13, 25-26). We ought to read these observation in combination with Spivak's remarks in her interview *Practical Politics of the Open End* by Sarah Harasym initially published in 1988 in the *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*. The non-essentialist stand is an ultra-orthodox stand because the it is not objectively possible to know the subaltern (109). The upper class perspective dominates all aspects of society. We seldom see a view, say of history, from the lowest strata of society.

We have to do with what we have, and that becomes our central and ideal view (109). Spivak avers that essentialism is a pre-condition for effective representation (109).

From the above discourse two elements of theory are deduced: an essentialist collective consciousness and representation. It is proposed that the essentialist technique above can be applied in the formulation of a collective subaltern consciousness despite differences between diverse subaltern groups which are clearly visible from a non-essentialist point of view. For instance, there are hardly any diplomatic relations between the conservatively religious subaltern and the queer subaltern. Strategic essentialism builds a bridge between the two. It is their minority/marginalized status that can be seen as a common ground to develop a collective consciousness failing which each subaltern group is eternally entrapped in vicious cycles of discrimination at the hands of the dominant class. This consciousness can be utilized to meet common interests touching upon the realization of human rights for all.

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, the *Jannat* (heaven) Guest House becomes a symbol of this consciousness and three particular graves in the guest house symbolize representation. When Anjum, Saeeda, Nimmo, Saddam, Zainab, Ustaniji, Udaya, and Tilo went out in a Mercedes to the mall, Anjum expressed dissatisfaction that Saddam's father is at peace (Roy, 409-413). They decided to purchase a shirt in his name and bury it in the graveyard (412). Zainab, a Muslim, recited a Hindu prayer, *Gayatri Mantra* in his memory (412). When Maryam Ipe died, the Syrian Church denied her a burial (253), such is the brutal nature of the faithful and the pious. Both, Maryam and Saddam were given a second funeral *via* a burial in two separate graves, in one was interred the shirt and in the other, the urn of ashes (413). Instead of a Christian prayer, Tilo recited her mother's favourite Shakespearean verse which helped her attain closure and catharsis (414). Revathy's letter was placed in a container, wrapped in a red flag, Dr Azad sang The Internationale and gave her a Red Salute (426-427). The subaltern collective consciousness is unorthodox, yet sublime and holy.

A peculiar feature of the *Jannat* is the humility among members of the guest house which allows them to be supportive of each other. There is no judgement. There is no condescension. Can fiction translate to reality? These elements, in my subjective experience as one who belongs to the middle class, do not exist at least in queer spaces in Goa. There is a class divide and the sense that subalternity, the sensation of being a lesser human in Indian society, has warped something from within which disallows us to fully let our guards down. The queer Goan space is not a safe space for all to be at ease where they can escape from society's phobia and enter into a utopia. There is no trust within the subaltern. There are crevices in our collective within which our souls are lost. Notwithstanding this, we united temporarily to protest against the Transgender Amendment Bill, 2026 (Colaco). Temporarily,

our differences were suspended and we all adopted a strategic essentialist approach to protest against the draconian bill. In April 2026, Subhash Velingkar urged the Government of Goa to make Marathi as the official language of the State (Team Herald). Velingker also stated that the Hindus and Marathi speakers vote for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP Wins). As a response, a gathering in support of the Konkani language was held on 19<sup>th</sup> April 2026 at Lohia Maidan, Margao where Prajal Sakhardande, a Goan historian and academician, stressed on *Goenkarponn* (Goan way of life) as the Goan religion, that Konkani is the language of this religion, and that Goans are not divided on the basis of Hindu, Muslim, and Christian (Meet, 11:00-11:45). The gathering saw participation from Goans from diverse religious backgrounds. Humility, empathy, and tolerance for perspectives from varied religious and class based backgrounds can go a long way towards establishing subaltern strategic essentialism.

## Conclusion

India has changed drastically compared to the temporal setting in the novel under consideration. Today, a Jannat Guest House would probably be bulldozed and demolished. A combined reading of *Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography* and the interview *Practical Politics of the Open End* provides us with a clear understanding of subaltern strategic essentialism as a pre-condition for effective representation of the subaltern. Such an idea ought to be applied in practice rather than limit it to mere theory. Subaltern activism and activism for the subaltern can certainly be guided by this theory to secure constructive strides towards an egalitarian society. The contrary can only lead to widespread disintegration of the subaltern into weak groups which would barely make any difference and shall continue to face unjust actions from the dominant class. This is in consonance of the over-arching theme and call of the novel: Marginalized of the world, unite!

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