

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness: The Subaltern's Resistance

El Ministerio de la Felicidad Suprema: La Resistencia Subalterna

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Abstract

The notion of the Subaltern subject is foregrounded at different instances within the novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) by Arundhati Roy. In this essay, we will focus on gender and language since the treatment of those aspects in this text highlights the marginalisation of post-colonial societies. In order to discover how the author constructs the resistance of the Subaltern, we will explore concepts such as hybridization, the Other, double-colonisation, heteronormative societies, and the analysis of in-between identities. The theoretical background will be provided by different authors, for instance Gayatri Spivak, Bill Ashcroft, Homi Bhabha, Ritu Tyagi, among others.

Keywords: Subaltern's resistance, language, gender, postcolonialism

Resumen

La noción del Sujeto Subalterno es destacada en diferentes instancias en la novela de Arundhati Roy The Ministry of Utmost Happiness (2017). En este ensayo, haremos hincapié en el análisis de género y lenguaje ya que el trato que reciben dichos aspectos, hacen destacar la marginalización de las sociedades post-coloniales. Para descubrir cómo la autora construye la idea de resistencia subalterna, exploraremos conceptos tales como hibridación, el Otro, colonización doble, sociedades heteronormativas e identidades encontradas en la intermediedad. El trasfondo teórico será proporcionado por diferentes autores tales como Gayatri Spivak, Bill Ashcroft, Homi Bhabha, Ritu Tyagi, entre otros. Palabras clave: Resistencia subalterna, lenguaje, género, postcolonialismo

Introduction

Despite the end of imposed dominance, many post-colonial societies are still being held back by the tacit belief that the Imperial centre is, in some way or another, superior to them. However, in the aftermath of colonialism, authors such

as Arundhati Roy —in her novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017)— have not only illustrated the detrimental effects that marginalisation has had on postcolonial people, but they have also shown the Subaltern's resistance to their supposed 'inferiority' through the exploration of two

of the topics where this discrepancy is made most evident: language and gender. In order to discuss their use in *The Ministry*, notions such as the Other, hybridisation, double colonisation and in-between identities are going to be considered, through the theoretical background presented by Gayatri Spivak, Bill Ashcroft, Homi Bhabha, Ritu Tyagi, among others.

Development

Language

The self-assured superiority of colonialist countries has not only been attained by the fluttering of armed forces, they have also indoctrinated the masses by means of their 'proper education' and language. As novelist George Lamming voices, since "England had acquired, somehow, the divine right to organise the native's reading, it is to be expected that England's export of literature would be English" (As cited in Ashcroft et al., 2003, p.14). An instance of this is found in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* when the narrator walks past a primary school and mentions that he "can hear children's voices in their classrooms, shouting *Baa baa black sheep*, rising to a shriek on *Wool!* and *Full!*" (Roy, 2017, p. 147) As well as when one of the main characters, Tilo, quotes Shakespeare "as an old tune remembered" (Roy, 2017, p. 241). India is one of those countries that have been subjected to this imposed tuition that includes not only the teaching of English as a second language, but also the reading of British Literature, seen as the centre of the Western Canon.

The adoption of an imported language has induced people to believe that their native culture should be belittled when compared with the stately centre. Regarding this spiritual subjugation, the Kenyan novelist Ngugi Wa Thiong'o says that "in schools and universities [native languages] were associated with negative qualities of backwardness [and] underdevelopment" (As cited in Ashcroft et al., 2003, p. 290). The disparity between those who have learnt an European language and those who have not is illustrated by Roy in another main character. Anjum, an Urdu speaker, undervalues herself both as a person and a mother when compared with Saeeda, who is "a graduate [that] knew English" a person who "could speak the language of the times" (Roy, 2017, p. 38). By downgrading herself and

her native tongue, she embodies the disparaging and self-deprecating ideas many postcolonial citizens have accepted as truths.

In spite of the cultural distance that the English language provokes, it is crucial to acknowledge its significance as a lingua franca. By adapting this foreign medium, post-colonial authors have expressed to multicultural audiences their repudiation of colonialism and its long-lasting effects. Moreover, they have also alluded to the conflicts that take place within their own independent homeland. For instance, Braj B. Kachru says that in India "Hindi [is commonly associated] with the Hindus; Urdu with the Muslims; and Hindustani with the... pandits" (As cited in Ashcroft et al., 2003, p. 292), showing the note of discord that has crept into relations between Indians over the native language they speak and the religion they profess. A portrayal of this appears in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, "Saddam had just enough time to whisper a small prayer of gratitude that the word [Anjum] used for the Almighty was the generic *Khuda* and not specifically *Allah mian* before the battle lines were drawn" (Roy, 2017, p. 121).

The public use of *Allah mian*, spoken in Urdu, would have displeased the non-Muslim listeners, which is why a more neutral Persian term is preferred to address their god (Persian used to be the country's lingua franca). Evidently, languages are carriers of culture and, at times, bearers of negative connotations - in this case among Indian tongues. Therefore, English has become a neutralising foreign code that provides the writer with social neutrality to convey referential meaning, sans most negative connotations (Ashcroft et al., 2003, p. 292).

More importantly, since British English cannot appropriately define the native society, it has been acculturated and nativised in order to carry the weight of the post-colonial experience (Kachru as cited in Ashcroft et al., 2003, p. 294). Thereby, an Indian version has entered the multiculturally minted group of *englishes* that attempt to modify this language to suit peripheral literatures. Many are the ways in which this is achieved. For instance, novelist Gabriel Okara says that "the only way to use [native ideas] effectively is to translate them almost literally from the [...] native language [...] into whatever European language [the writer] is using as medium of expression" (As cited in Ashcroft et al., 2003,

p. 286). Verbatim might even imply an alteration of the English syntax, which is surely delimited by the necessity of the text being understood. Another instance of interlanguage is relexification or code-mixing, which is repeatedly used in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. In some cases, there are words such as *hijra* or *azadi* that are left untranslated since no English word could possibly transmit their significance. Fortunately, the reader could decipher their meaning through context. However, in other cases, whole untranslated poems are included, leaving the reader with the duty of translating them on their own, an opportunity for them to show the depth of their interest in the language of those who were colonised. As a result of this interlanguage, Homi Bhabha mentions that languages are a place of hybridity and inclusive expression (1994, p. 25). In particular, English —once a metropolitan tongue— is transformed into a vehicle for social, linguistic and historical revolution.

Gender

In order to explore the subaltern as regards gender, a strong character that embodies hybridization and the struggle to construct an identity to be free will be analysed. The character is Anjum: she is presented as “a rare example of a Hermaphrodite” (Roy, 2017, p. 16) and belongs to what is called a *third gender*. Arundhati Roy, being an activist involved in human rights, inserts transgender voices challenging hegemonic representations in literature allowing “gender normativity to disappear into the unanalyzed” (Stryker & Whittle, 2006, p. 3), which is one of the transgender studies’ aims.

Anjum’s mother discovered the baby had both reproductive organs. She named the baby Aftab —a male name— starting the gender segregation Anjum will suffer later. The mother thought of killing the baby and herself because of the lack of dichotomous gender distinctions, “Everything was either masculine or feminine, man or woman. Everything except her baby” (Roy, 2017, p. 8). In addition, her father “embarked on the cultural project of inculcating manliness in Aftab” (Roy, 2017, p. 17). Under those circumstances, her family othered her and tried to suppress her female identity, colonizing her body and her sexuality: she suffers from a double colonization. Moreover, “The “in-between” identity of Anjum and her “patched together” body

depicts the cultural conflict of the colonized countries after colonization.” (Assumi, 2018, p. 56) As regards this double colonization, Katrina Roen wonders in *Transgender Theory and Embodiment: the risk of racial Marginalisation*, “Where are people of racial ‘minorities’ situated in queer and transgender theories?” (2001, p. 253) The narrative has a transgender person’s voice but also it is a voice of an Indian, Muslim character who escapes from the gender binarism. Roy gives voice to the minorities and challenges the dominant as “The task of a postcolonial theorist is to insert the often ‘absent’ colonized subject into the dominant discourse in a way that it resists/subverts the authority of the colonizer” (Tyagi, 2014, p. 45).

Everything changes after Anjum’s transformation into a hijra. According to Anthropologist Serena Nanda, “The hijras are a religious community of men who dress and act like women...” (1999, p. 9). She explains in *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India* that there are different complexities as regards the hijra definition, as not all of them feel they “are like women” (1999, p. XIX-XX). Roy commented in an interview “...this is true in India that there has always been a space for the Hijras [...] it is a marginalized space, but it is a space...” (2018). Nanda remarks that “As is the case of marginal and oppressed peoples in many cultures, very little of what has been written on the hijras gives them a voice of their own at any length or on a wide range of topics. This both distorts data and, more important, dehumanizes the subjects” (1999, p. 11). So, in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Roy humanises hijras exposing their reality to the reader but also portraying different genders which are not part of the man-woman bipolar construct, “She lives in a community of people who have an infinite number of genders [...] there are men who just dresses as women, there are people who have had surgery, there are all kinds of different kinds of people...” (2018). That community is the Khwabgah, Anjum’s place of liberation, where she is “finally able to dress in the clothes she longed to wear” (Roy, 2017, p. 25), signaling her gender identity freely by means of the sartorial representations. People there in the Khwabgah “...live together and they refer to the outside world as the Duniya, which means ‘The World’ [...] they somehow see themselves as somehow outside of the Duniya...” (Roy, 2018). Gayatri Spivak defines the subaltern as “a deviation

from an ideal [...] which is itself defined as a difference from the elite" (As cited in Ashcroft et al. 2003, p. 27). Therefore, they recognize themselves as subaltern people as they are discriminated, being conscious that "such differences are transformed into social hierarchies" (Stryker, 2006, p. 3). Anjum —and the Khwabgah residents in general— have to fight against those gender hierarchies, the accepted gendered norms and, in that way, they have to be part of the anti-colonial resistance.

Spivak also states that, "For the 'true' subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself; the intellectual's solution is not to abstain from representation" (As cited in Ashcroft et al. 2003, p. 27). We consider the author represents transgender and intersex identities and explores their suffering in order to expose and analyse the ways in which they are marginalised by normative societies and, while doing so, the subaltern is able to speak.

Conclusion

In order to conclude this analysis, we can state the notion of the Subaltern is foregrounded at different instances within the novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) by Arundhati Roy. The Subaltern's resistance can be explored in both selected main areas of analysis. On the one hand, language and the treatment of the powerful English contrasted with the different languages spoken in India which downgrade the speakers' status but also their entire native culture. On the other hand, gender and the exploration of an heteronormative society that alienated and othered the main character and dissident genders in general.

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