

## Arundhati Roy's Novel "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness": A Study of Innovative Use of Translation and Intertextuality

Ghazala Tabbassum

Associate Professor, Head of English Department, Rawalpindi Women University, Rawalpindi

Correspondence email: [ghazala.tabbasum@yahoo.com](mailto:ghazala.tabbasum@yahoo.com)

### Abstract

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness is Arundhati Roy's second novel in which she weaves a story around her protagonist Anjum, who was born as Aftab, a child with hermaphroditic physical condition, and interlinks her tale with other characters in a compelling saga of love, freedom and power-politics. Her narrative details the crucial issue of transgender identity, physical, emotional and psychological fracture such people suffer, and management of resultant trauma. This theme is highlighted through her linguistics strategies which appears to be a conscious act within the context of the book. The novel is rich in referring to other texts especially Urdu poetry. She also seems to be aware of the debates on purpose and function of translation in linguistic and cultural studies. Roy purposively flavors her prose with Urdu verses of many classical poets and endeavors to translate these verses as well. This study explores the author's intention and the rhetorical activity both in the use of intertextuality and translation by combining Bakhtin's concept of intertextuality with application of Halliday's theory of Theme/Rheme in the process of translation. This paper argues that Roy's use of intertextuality and ambiguous translation are conscious activities to create a linguistic duet for Aunjum/Aftab's hybrid character with "Hijra tendencies" for the purpose of thematic parallelism. This study points towards an innovative use of translation and intertextuality by the author hitherto undiscussed in translation theories. Roy's use raises questions of aesthetic, literary and semantic combined in a text.

**Keywords:** intertextuality, translation, hermaphrodite, linguistic duet, thematic parallelism

### 1. Introduction

Arundhati Roy hails from India. She is a writer and a journalist. She wrote her first novel *The God of Small Things* between 1992 and 1996. Published one year later, this début fictional work took the literary world by storm and catapulted Roy to worldwide critical and popular acclaim. The novel won the 1997 Booker Prize and stormed the shelves of every bookstore in the markets of the world. It is reported that more than six million copies were sold since its publication and the novel has been translated into scores of international languages. Hailed as the voice of the peripheral (Boehmer, 2005) in the caste-ridden society of India, the novel established Roy's linguistic originality and innovative use of English idiom.

For her second novel, Roy let her readers wait for 20 years. Meanwhile instead of basking in the sudden found fame, she used her idolized status to highlight social and political injustices world over. She wrote extensively on national and global politics,

human rights as well as environmental abuse in her number of non-fiction books and newspapers, until 2 decades later she finally completed her second novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, published this year in June and long listed for the Man Booker prize 2017.

### 1.1 Problem Statement

Roy, in her novel “Ministry of Utmost Happiness” (2017) narrates a transgender’s fractured biological and social identity and resultant trauma. Her linguistic strategies are a patchwork of intertextuality, transliteration and translation of Urdu verses purposefully employed to highlight the theme and to create a linguistic duet of her hermaphroditic protagonist.

## 2. Literature Review

The novel *Ministry of Utmost Happiness* offers, in Roy’s own words, a hulking, sprawling story like an intricate, delicately sketched map of a great city, written on a wide canvas within time zone that spans from 1950s to present day India, and spatiality that takes its readers from walled city of old Dehli to new Metropolis, Gujrat, Kashmir and mountainous terrain of Afghanistan.

The two main characters, the one socially out cast Anjum, who was born as Aftab, “a rare example of hermaphrodite” struggles with her dual identity and crosses social boundaries to carve a little niche of her own within the mesh of a hostile and brutal world. The other is Tilottama, or Tilo, a political out cast, an architect turned an activist, smoking Ganesh beedies, she bewitches three men, Musa and Naga, and Garson Hobart who were connected by the “forests of feelings” for her. Roy brings these two women together through an abandoned baby in a crib of litter and interlinks their tales with other characters threading through episodic history of Partition of India, making of Bangladesh, Indra Gandhi’s murder and resultant massacre of Sikhs, 9/11, Gujrat racial riots and Kashmir freedom movement. Thus, she juggles a compelling saga of love, state-sponsored violence, language and identity, and power-politics. Her topnotch trick in the narrative, however, remains her powerful depiction of a transgender protagonist.

Jerry Pinto (2017) an Indian writer, poet and translator reviews *Ministry of Utmost Happiness* as an important yet defective work. His first objection is to the novel over stretched canvas packed with all of Indianness; the fading glory of Urdu and Sanskrit, the hijra and the Kashmir freedom fighter community, the political and racial riots in Bhopal and Gujrat, the Anna Hazare movement, and the rise of Hindu extremism in Ayodhya and Godhra. He calls this thickly populated book a kaleidoscope, constantly shifting shapes and patterns with story moving backwards, and time is like a free fall.

Pinto also criticizes ironical tone of Roy that she maintains right from the title of the novel till the coda. He opines that Roy recreates “Orwellian horrors” with ironic hipsterism.

Karan Mahajan, an Indian American writer and critic, in his book review for The New York Times (June 9, 2017) lauds Roy’s brilliant use of words to create images which are Roy’s artistic merit. Mahajan also finds Roy’s book fascinating for its meticulously detailed cultural affinities of Muslim population of old Dehli and landscape of Kashmir with its fruit orchards and wildlife. Her strength, however, is the portrayal of broken lives and identities of her protagonists.

Chantal Da Silva, a Canadian-British writer and journalist writes in Daily Independent (June 21, 2017) that Roy’s story is a “labyrinthine journey” both in space and in time. Through the love tales of both Anjum and Tilo, Roy ultimately returns to her signature political satire on Indian government. Batra (2017) in his research article critiques Roy’s second novel as an expression of its author’s political philosophy and creative talent. Menozzi (2018) in his research article investigates Roy’s novel with the lens of postcolonialism and calls her novel an aesthetic representation of the suffering of the marginalized in history and politics of India. Gorman-DaRif (2018) takes up a comparative study of Roy’s *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* and Neel Mukherjee’s *A State of Freedom* as discourse of Indian Feminist Naxalite movement.

The literature review highlights that most of the reviews/critiques written on Roy’s *Ministry of Utmost Happiness* focus around the complex narrative and its political overtones. Roy’s use of intertextuality and translation has not been discussed as a narrative schema which is the main argument of this study.

### **3. Research Methodology**

This study explores the author’s intention and the rhetorical activity in the use of intertextuality, transliteration and translation in the novel. The researcher has used Bakhtin’s concept of intertextuality as many voices in a single text as the framework to underscore Roy’s linguistic strategies for the purpose of thematic parallelism. The researcher has also made use of Halliday’s theory of Theme/Rheme in the process of translation to draw attention to Roy’s innovative use of translation. In her translation of Urdu poetry, she disturbs Halliday’s Theme-Rheme order for creating a linguistic duet of her protagonist and thus, her use of translation has ideological implication.

The word intertextuality is not Bakhtin’s coinage, nevertheless his ideas on "dialogicity" and Heteroglossia have provided the baseline for Julia Kristeva’s invention of the term intertextuality to indicate the complex interrelationship between a text and

other texts which is significant in the interpretation of any given text. Intertextuality denotes the way in which these other texts intrude or are deliberately brought into a writing reinforcing the intended meaning within the complex mesh of text and other texts. This borrowing from other texts creates layers of meaning and implies the plurality and fluidity of meaning and influence the process of meaning making in the original text (Eagleton, 1996). It serves, as in allegories, as a parallel narrative. In his study of Dostoevsky's poetics and his own seminal work "The Dialogic Imagination", Bakhtin emphasizes on the relation of the form of novel and a form of consciousness by which he means the multiplicity of utterances of different characters in a literary work especially novel.

Halliday's theme - rheme structure suggests that the component at the beginning of the sentence played a special role, i.e. to introduce the topic. Theme, for Halliday, is the "point of departure; it is that with which the clause is concerned" (Halliday, 1994, p. 37). For him theme plays a crucial role in focusing and organizing the message and to contribute to the coherence and success of the message. Rheme is exactly opposite of Theme: it is the group of linguistic units making up a clause where the Theme is developed (Halliday, 1994, p. 37).

#### 4. Scope/ limitations

Roy's novel is a thick sample of 437 pages and offers a dense data in intertextuality and translation. The scope of the study does not allow to work upon the whole of the text therefore the study has been delimited to the first 150 pages, and only translation of Urdu poetry has been focused upon.

#### 5. Analysis

##### 5.1 The Hermaphroditic Protagonist

Roy opens her novel with her first protagonist, born as Aftab, in *Shahjehanabad in walled city of Delhi*. His tiny body with Hijra tendencies *scrambled* his mother's *sense of the world* but she guarded his biological duality and kept it secret even from her husband. At the age of five it was discovered that he could sing exceptionally well. Ustad Hameed Khan polished his singing talent and at age 9 he could sing like a *Lukhnow Courtesan*. As he grew up, his secret of dual-gender character was known, and this provoked the snickering and teasing from his play mates;

*"He's she. He is not a He or a She. He's He and a She. She-He, He –She Hee! Hee! Hee!"*

(Roy, 2017, p. 10)

Finally, Aftab was medically pronounced *a rare example of Hermaphrodite* with *Hijra tendencies* that were there to stay forever. His father tried his best to appease this duality by “inculcating manliness in Aftab”. He would tell him chivalric stories of his ancestors who were brave fighting men and heroes of battle fields. These stories fell flat on Aftab but when he was told of Changez Khan’s story; how he fought valiantly to get back his beautiful wife, Borte Khatun, Aftab found himself yearning to be her. This psychological tension pushes him more towards “a tall woman with lipstick” named as Bombay Silk, a hijra in his neighborhood. Aftab could not stop himself from longing to be her. Eventually this attraction led him to abandon his home. He was disowned by his father and adopted by Kulsoom Bi, the Ustad, guru and head of Khwabghah, a kind of hostile-home of Hijra community in the same locality. Aftab who always wanted to be She, was named Anjum and she savored her feminine status. Soon however, she grew to be six feet tall with hair on her face and body which she carefully camouflaged.

Wrapped in gaudy clothes and painted in thick make up, Anjum showed off an *exaggerated, outrageous kind of femininity* with a deep, powerful masculine voice.

As such she earned fame for her dancing and was a sort after lover but she herself remained a stranger to the territory of love. Her conflict was naturally simple but profoundly tragic; she could not be a woman and she did not want to be a man.

At the age of forty, an accidental possession of a lost three-year-old child Zainab, improvised for Anjum an experiential motherhood, and a flavor of genuine human love. Loving Zainab, though maladroitly, as her own child was a cathartic experience for Anjum. She became jealously possessive of the child. A trip to Ajmer Sharif, to pray for the wellbeing of the child, trapped Anjum into Gujrat riots where she witnessed the state sponsored violence, *the folding of men and unfolding of women*. She barely survived the massacre *by butcher’s luck*, but the experience changed her forever. She was psychologically and emotionally traumatized by the memories of violence in Gujrat and returned to Khwabghah as drained of all human passion except fear. She cut Zainab’s hair like a boy and started dressing her as a boy and called her Mehdi for the fear of Gujrat coming to Delhi. Zainab revolted against her gender mutilation and denounced Anjum as her mother leaving Anjum heart broken. Anjum once again changed her identity, dressed in pathan suit and men’s shoes, moved her belongings to a graveyard to live there as a “*counterfeit corpse of a counterfeit woman*” (Roy, 2017, p. 62).

Roy gives voice to a socially outcast community through Anjum/Aftab’s narrative and describes their mental anguish with deep psychological insights. Aftab/Anjum was told by Nimo Gorakhpuri, another hijra with whom he became intimate that they were created by God as an experiment. God wanted to create a living being incapable of

happiness and therefore He created Hijras. “[T]he beating husbands and cheating wives are all in us. The riot is inside us. The war is inside us... it will never settle down. It can’t” (Roy, 2017, p. 23).

Thus, we see that Roy creates a character whose natural self, the physical and the social identity, along with its psychological makeup is a patchwork, a patched-up body with a polyphonic voice. Moreover, the duality of Anjum/Aftab keeps on shifting throughout the novel creating a mosaic identity, a quality that Roy replicates linguistically by patching her prose with intertextuality and translation or in Bakhtinian concept, she creates a parallel narrative.

## 5.2 Intertextuality and Translation as Parallel Identity Structure

Bakhtin favours “multivocality, dialogism, or polyphony in a text because he believes that human language is naturally a complex entity, and a text that depends on an “authoritative univocality, monologism, or monophony” cannot evoke the human experience in its complicated interrelatedness (Bazerman, 1993). Bakhtin considers Dialogism a moral imperative and for him it functions as an agency against authority and power structure. It is for readers to dig deep into these intertexts to understand why the writer is invoking these texts, how far they are relevant and what purposes they serve. Thus, integrating multiple voices in a text has ideological implications. Roy has used Bakhtinian concept of many voices in a single text literally to create a character with masculine/feminine dual voice. Roy tells us;

“A series of surgeries and hormonal pills gave Anjum a patched-together body and undeepten her voice, but it restricted its resonance, coarsened its timber and gave it a peculiar, rasping quality which sometimes sounded like two voices quarrelling with each other instead of one.” (Roy, 2017, p. 19)

This biological duality of Aftab/Anjum is further reinforced through patches of intertextuality such as transliteration of Urdu verses of classical Urdu poets creating polyphony that replicates the hermaphroditic protagonist. It is interesting to note that the use of intertextuality frequents the text in the first part of the novel that deals mainly with Aftab/Anjum’s story. In later part of the novel this code-mixing intertexts rarely appear. Roy carries this linguistic parallelism another step further by translating Urdu verses in English.

It is interesting to note that Urdu verses follow Halliday’s theme-rheme structure. Halliday argues that a message structure in English is comprised of a Theme plus a rheme. There is an order to the structure: Theme comes first, followed by rheme, and

whatever is placed in initial position is theme (Halliday, 1994, p. 37). These two examples from the novel have been investigated in the light of the theme-rheme structure.

### 1) Transliteration

*Jis sar ko ghurur aaj hai yaan taj-vari ka  
Kal uss pe yahin shor hai phir nauhagari ka*

### English translation

*The head which today proudly flaunts a crown  
Will tomorrow, right here, in lamentation drown*

(Roy, 2017, p. 15)

### 2) Transliteration

*Jisey ishq ka tiir kaari lage  
Usey zindagi kyuun na bhari lage*

### English translation

*For one struck down by Cupid's bow  
Life becomes burdensome, isn't that so?*

(Roy, 2017, p. 44)

In both these examples Urdu verses follow theme-rheme structure while Roy's translation disturbs this arrangement. In second line of both the verses she omits theme and retains rheme.

In the first example the Jis Sur, i.e. crowned head is the theme which is repeated in second line of the verse as Us pe, i.e. is the same one, but Roy has omitted it in the second line while translating it. In the second verse in second line only life being burdensome is mentioned while she has omitted the word the love-struck one. According to Halliday, theme is generally restricted or fixed part of the message while the rheme is subject to change. Roy's translation emphasizes the changeable, not fixed part creating a duplicate of Anjum/Aftab's dual, ever-changing biological and social identity structure.

## 5.3 Ambiguity Created in Translation

Roy's translation further attempts to emphasize the hermaphroditism which is the focus of the narrative carried at biological, psychological and social levels. The following examples taken from texts have been critically examined to prove the critical stance.



### 3) Transliteration

*Dil cheez kya hai aap meri jaan lijiye  
Bas ek baar mera kah maan lijiye*

#### English translation

*Why just my heart, take my whole life too  
But just this once, my love, grant me my wish*

(Roy, 2017, p. 123)

In Urdu verse *dil* or heart is insignificant in comparison with *Jaan* or life and therefore only life and not heart is offered to the lover while in translation not just heart, but life too has been offered to the beloved. This addition in her translation results in semantic shift. Another example carries the same shift in meaning.

### 4) Transliteration

*Mar gayee bulbul qafas mein  
Keh gayee sayyaad se  
Apni sunehri gaand mein  
Tu thoons le fasl-e-bahar*

#### English translation

*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, 2017, p. 133)

In this example translation suffers literal and semantic loss. *Bulbul* is ambiguously translated as a little bird while its English equivalent is nightingale (Collins English Dictionary). Moreover, the inclusion of word *please* distorts the abusive aggressive tone of the Urdu verse into teasing mockery. Thus, translation of the verses maintains the mutilated, distorted identity matrix of the protagonist. Dr. Asma Aftab in her doctoral thesis attaches great significance to what she calls “interplay between text and context” and argues that “all meanings are context-dependent and permanently anticipated from a particular horizon, perspective or background of intelligibility” (Aftab, 2016, p. 114). Roy creates a hermaphroditic linguistic character to parallel her protagonist. She refers to



this parallelism early in the novel when she describes Jahanara Begum's reactions on finding her baby a hijra.

“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. Was it possible to live outside 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, 2017, p. 8)

#### 5.4 Ideological Implication of Translation

The study has argued that Roy's narrative addresses the duality of transgender identity to give voice to a marginalized section of society and her linguistics strategies are synchronized with the theme of peripheral status of Hijras. The exercise of ideology in translation is as old as the history of translation itself. According to Fawcett (1998), ‘throughout the centuries, individuals and institutions applied their particular beliefs to the production of certain effect in translation’ (p. 107). Translation has been considered a peripheral language in comparison with source language which is coded as power language. Roy uses translation structure as peripheral language to reinforce the peripheral status of transgender in her novel as universal social reality.

#### 7. Conclusion

The study shows that Roy's use of intertextuality and distorted, ambiguous translation structure are conscious activities to create a linguistic duet for Anjum/Aftab's hybrid character with “Hijra tendencies” for the purpose of thematic parallelism. Moreover, translation as the marginalized linguistic structure mirrors the socially marginalized transgender community. “I'll have to find a language to tell the story I want to tell,” Roy said in an interview as she discussed returning to fiction. “By language I don't mean English, Hindi, Urdu, Malayalam, of course. I mean something else. A way of binding together worlds that have been ripped apart” (The Atlantic, personal communication, 2011). Another interesting evidence is the poem used as coda in Roy's novel that seems to reflect the author's own intentions: “How to tell a shattered story? By slowly becoming everybody. No. By slowly becoming everything” (Roy, 2017. p. 436). In her attempt to “become everything”, the author makes use of all kinds of devices, literary and linguistic, and experiments boldly. This study points towards an innovative use of translation and intertextuality by the author hitherto un-discussed in translation theories. Roy's use raises questions of aesthetics, linguistics and ideological combined in a text.

## References

- Arundhati Roy on 'The Ministry of Utmost Happiness'. (2017, May 25) *An Interview* (personal communication) Retrieved from <https://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/2017/arundhati-roy.html#KMRJXb4TI79Hih0m.99>
- Alfaro, M. J. M. (2011). *Intertextuality: Origins and Development of The Concept*. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41054827>
- Batra, J. (2017). Politico-Literary Response to Terrorism: A Study of Arundhary Roy's The Ministry of Utmost Happiness. *Humanities and Social Sciences Review*, 07(02), 429–438. CD-ROM. ISSN: 2165-6258.
- Gentzler, E. (1993). *Contemporary Translation Theories*. New York: Routledge.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (2000). *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*, Second edition. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Harder, H. (2017). *A few introductory remarks on Bakhtin and Intertextuality*. Retrieved from [http://www.scm.uni-halle.de/reporting\\_list/study\\_days/sektion1/2303855\\_2303900/](http://www.scm.uni-halle.de/reporting_list/study_days/sektion1/2303855_2303900/)
- Irshad, I., & Ali, G. (2016). Analyzing the Phenomenon of Intertextuality in the Process of Literary Translation. *Pakistan Journal of Languages and Translation Studies*. p. 73-98.
- Mahajan, K. (2017, June 9). *Arundhati Roy's Return to the Form That Made Her Famous*. The New York Times. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/09/books/review/arundhati-roys-return-to-the-form- that-made-her-famous.html>
- Menozzi, F. (2018) "Too much blood for good literature": Arundhati Roy's The Ministry of Utmost Happiness and the question of realism. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2018.1507919>
- Orr, M. (2003). *Intertextuality: Debates and Contexts*. Cambridge: Polity Press. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/09/books/review/arundhati-roysreturn-to-the-form-that- made-her-famous.html>
- Roy, A. (2017). *Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Hamish Hamilton: Penguin Random House, UK.

---

Sehgal, P. (2017, August 15). *Arundhati Roy's Fascinating Mess*, The Atlantic.  
Retrieved from  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/07/arundhati-roys-fascinatingmess/528684/>