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Anthropological Study of Arundhati Roy's *Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

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Abstract: Literature and anthropology are complementary in nature that the former reflects upon the lives of people while the latter studies the human nature and culture through a scientific and systematic framework. In the present day context a scientific approach to the study of humanity and culture is required to rationalize the modalities of human life. Such an enquiry is possible through the examination of literature in a systematic backdrop. This hybridity of study would help the anthropologists to get the real time facts to their research and critics a reason for the change in trend of behaviour of people. *Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, the second novel of the author Arundhati Roy presents a holistic socio-political scenario of Indian sub-continent. This novel helps people to understand the different needs and goals of the people across this nation. An anthropological study of this novel would help in the scientific estimation of the different behavioural templates of pan India which is known for its oneness in otherness. The present study would help even the critics to understand literature better. The study deals with few instances from the novel against the theoretical ideologies of Hall, Harris and Mervin.

Keywords: Anthropological Study, Arundhati Roy, Ministry of Utmost Happiness.

Arundhati Roy, renowned for her thought-provoking narratives and powerful storytelling, mesmerized readers worldwide with her second novel, "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness." Published in 2017, this literary masterpiece captivated audiences through its intricate web of characters, diverse settings, and vivid portrayal of the social and political landscape of contemporary India. By intertwining individual lives with larger socio-cultural forces, Roy weaves a narrative tapestry that reflects the complexities and contradictions of human existence.

In this paper, we embark on an anthropological exploration of Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, aiming to illuminate the novel's profound anthropological dimensions. Anthropology, as a discipline, endeavors to understand the complexities of human societies and cultures through the lens of cultural relativism, ethnography, and critical analysis. By employing anthropological perspectives, we delve into the nuances of Roy's novel, examining how it exposes and examines cultural practices, political structures, and the social dynamics that shape the lives of its characters. At the heart of Roy's narrative lies a rich tapestry of diverse characters, each representing a distinct socio-cultural identity and experience. Through their intersecting paths, the novel unveils the intricate interplay between gender, class, caste, religion, and ethnicity in the Indian context. Drawing from the fieldwork-based approach of anthropology, we aim to analyze these characters, their contexts, and the social institutions they navigate, shedding light on the broader anthropological themes that emerge from their stories.

Moreover, the novel's exploration of social justice, activism, and the resistance against power structures provides a fertile ground for anthropological inquiry. Roy's nuanced portrayal of political movements, ecological concerns, and struggles for land rights amplifies the voices of marginalized communities and underscores the inherent power dynamics that shape socio-political landscapes. By adopting an anthropological lens, we strive to unravel the underlying mechanisms of power and resistance embedded within the narrative, illuminating the broader socio-political implications that emerge from Roy's intricate storytelling.

As we embark on this anthropological journey through Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, we recognize the novel's significance in both literary and anthropological spheres. By engaging with the multifaceted layers of human experiences, cultural practices, and socio-political dynamics, this study aims to provide valuable insights into the intersections between literature, anthropology, and the understanding of our shared humanity. In the subsequent sections, we will analyze key characters, cultural contexts, power dynamics, and the socio-political landscape portrayed in Roy's novel. By doing so, we hope to contribute to a broader discourse surrounding literature's potential to shed light on anthropological inquiries and foster a deeper understanding of our intricate world.

The application of anthropological theory in literature involves using anthropological concepts, frameworks, and perspectives to analyze and understand literary texts. It allows for a deeper exploration of cultural, social, and historical contexts, as well as the complexities of human behavior and interactions depicted in literature. Anthropological theory emphasizes the significance of culture in shaping individuals and societies. When applied to literature, this perspective examines how cultural beliefs, values, rituals, and practices influence characters and plot developments. It involves analyzing the representation of cultural systems, social norms, and cultural clashes within the narrative. Anthropology offers insights into the construction and negotiation of identity. Applying this to literature involves examining how characters form their identities, navigate through different social roles, and deal with issues of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class. It also includes exploring how power dynamics and social structures shape individual and collective identities.

Anthropological theory recognizes the role of symbols, myths, and rituals in human societies. When applied to literature, this perspective involves analyzing the use of symbolism, metaphor, and allegory within the text. It explores how these literary devices convey deeper cultural and social meanings, and how they contribute to the creation of shared narratives and collective identities. Anthropological theory examines social structures, hierarchies, and power relations within societies. When applied to literature, this perspective involves analyzing the depiction of social classes, political systems, and institutionalized forms of power in the narrative. It explores how characters negotiate and resist these structures and the consequences of their actions. Anthropological theory encourages a detailed and nuanced observation of social and cultural phenomena. Applied to literature, this perspective involves a close reading of the text, attending to details and descriptions that reveal cultural practices, landscapes, and everyday life. It also involves an awareness of the author's positionality and the potential biases or cultural assumptions present in the text. By applying anthropological theory to literature, scholars and critics gain a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural contexts in which literary works are situated. It allows for a more comprehensive analysis of the themes, characters, and narratives, shedding light on the interplay between literature and society and enriching our interpretation of the text.

"Arundhati Roy's *Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is a novel that takes readers on a captivating journey through the diverse and tumultuous landscape of India. Published in 2017, it is the second novel by Indian author Arundhati Roy, following her critically acclaimed debut *The God of Small Things*. The novel weaves together multiple narratives, interconnecting the lives of various characters from different backgrounds, ethnicities, and social classes. At its core, the story explores themes of love, loss, identity, and the pursuit of happiness against the backdrop of a complex and politically charged India.

The narrative begins with the introduction of Anjum, a transgender woman living in the vibrant city of Delhi. Anjum's story serves as a starting point to explore the marginalized communities of hijras (Transgender) and their struggle for acceptance and recognition. As she navigates through life, Anjum finds solace and establishes her own unique community in a graveyard, where she creates a space of refuge and belonging.

Parallel to Anjum's narrative, the novel introduces another protagonist named Tilo, a woman who has lived a life steeped in activism and resistance. Tilo's story is deeply intertwined with the political landscape of India, particularly the Kashmir conflict, which forms a significant backdrop for the novel. Through Tilo's experiences, the novel delves into the complex history of the region, the suffering of its people, and the ongoing struggle for autonomy and justice. As the narrative progresses, the lives of Anjum and Tilo intersect, and their stories merge with those of other characters, creating a tapestry of interconnected lives. The novel also explores the themes of violence, communal tensions, and the profound impact of political upheaval on individual lives.

Arundhati Roy's writing style is richly descriptive and evocative, capturing the diverse cultures, landscapes, and emotions of India. Her prose is marked by lyrical beauty and a deep empathy for her characters, painting a vivid picture of their inner worlds and the external forces that shape their lives. "Arundhati Roy's *Ministry of Utmost Happiness*" is a compelling and thought-provoking novel that challenges societal norms, highlights the struggles of marginalized communities, and sheds light on the complexities of love and human connection in a country marked by both beauty and turmoil. Through its

multifaceted narrative, the novel offers a deep exploration of the human condition and the search for ultimate happiness in a world fraught with contradictions.

Ministry of Utmost Happiness by Arundhati Roy incorporates several anthropological concepts, shedding light on various aspects of Indian society and culture. The novel explores the concept of gender and sexuality through the character of Anjum, a transgender woman. It delves into the cultural and social dynamics surrounding gender identity in India, as well as the struggles faced by hijras, a marginalized community of transgender individuals. Roy challenges traditional notions of gender and highlights the diversity of gender expressions. The novel reflects the complexities of identity formation in a multicultural and multiethnic society like India. It portrays the Kashmir conflict, where various ethnic and religious groups coexist amidst tensions and violence. Roy examines the impacts of conflict on individual and collective identities, emphasizing the fluidity and contested nature of ethnic and national identities. The novel provides a nuanced portrayal of social hierarchies and the experiences of marginalized communities in Indian society. It explores the lives of characters from lower castes, hijras, and religious minorities who face discrimination and exclusion. Roy highlights the struggles for recognition, acceptance, and social justice faced by these communities.

Ministry of Utmost Happiness delves into political anthropology by examining the effects of political unrest and conflicts on individuals and communities. The Kashmir conflict serves as a backdrop, shedding light on the complexities of power dynamics, state repression, and the impact on everyday lives. The novel underscores the interplay between politics, violence, and social transformations. The novel incorporates various religious and cultural rituals, providing insights into the diversity of beliefs and practices in India. It explores the role of rituals in shaping individual and collective identities, as well as their significance in navigating life's challenges. The inclusion of funeral rituals and practices of mourning highlights the cultural variations in dealing with death and grief.

The novel vividly portrays the urban landscape of Delhi, capturing its vibrant and chaotic nature. It delves into the social dynamics of urban spaces, exploring themes of migration, urbanization, and the challenges faced by marginalized communities in the city. Roy's depiction of neighborhoods, streets, and

public spaces reflects the complexities and diversity of urban life in India. Through these anthropological concepts, "Ministry of Utmost Happiness" provides a multidimensional understanding of Indian society, its challenges, and the resilience of its people. Arundhati Roy's exploration of these concepts adds depth and richness to the narrative, offering readers a thought-provoking examination of the complexities of human existence.

Arundhati Roy's novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* explores complex themes of identity, politics, and social justice in contemporary India. While the novel does not explicitly engage with Claude Lévi-Strauss' anthropological theory, we can draw connections between the two by examining some key concepts and ideas. Lévi-Strauss was a prominent French anthropologist known for his structuralist approach to studying societies and cultures. He emphasized the underlying structures and patterns that shape human behaviour and thought. One of his notable ideas was the concept of binary oppositions, where he argued that societies organize themselves based on fundamental binary categories, such as nature/culture, raw/cooked, or male/female. These oppositions create meaning and structure within societies.

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Roy explores the complexities of identity and the intersections of various social and cultural categories. The characters in the novel challenge traditional binary oppositions, particularly in relation to gender and sexuality. For example, Anjum, a hijra (a transgender woman), defies the male/female binary and embodies a fluid and multifaceted identity. Roy's portrayal of characters like Anjum highlights the constructed nature of binary oppositions and invites readers to question fixed categories of identity.

Another concept central to Lévi-Strauss' work is the notion of bricolage, which refers to the creative and adaptive use of existing cultural elements to construct new meanings and practices. In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, the characters navigate a complex socio-political landscape by employing bricolage in their lives. They draw upon a range of cultural, religious, and political references to create hybrid identities and subvert dominant narratives.

Moreover, Lévi-Strauss argued that myths and narratives play a crucial role in structuring societies and expressing deep-seated cultural beliefs. Roy's novel is replete with stories, myths, and fables that reflect the

diverse cultural and historical contexts of India. These narratives provide a rich tapestry of voices and perspectives, challenging monolithic narratives and offering a counter-narrative to the mainstream discourse.

Additionally, Lévi-Strauss emphasized the importance of studying kinship systems and social structures in understanding societies. In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Roy examines the complex webs of relationships, both familial and communal, that shape the characters' lives. She portrays how these relationships are shaped by social hierarchies, political conflicts, and historical legacies. While "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness" does not directly engage with Lévi-Strauss' anthropological theory, it aligns with some of his key ideas. Roy's exploration of identity, binary oppositions, bricolage, narratives, and social structures resonates with Lévi-Strauss' insights into the fundamental aspects of human societies. Through her storytelling, Roy invites readers to question and challenge existing norms and to imagine new possibilities for a more inclusive and just society.

In Arundhati Roy's novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, the relationship between anthropology and literature is complex and intertwined. Roy's background as a social and political activist, as well as her keen observational skills, lends an anthropological lens to her storytelling. She weaves together elements of anthropology and literature to explore themes of identity, politics, and social justice.

One way in which anthropology and literature intersect in the novel is through the ethnographic approach to storytelling. Roy immerses the reader in the diverse cultural landscapes of India, capturing the essence of different communities, their rituals, and their social structures. She pays close attention to the intricacies of language, customs, and traditions, offering a vivid portrayal of Indian society. Through her vivid descriptions and rich characterization, Roy presents a microcosm of Indian society, which can be seen as an anthropological study. She delves into the lives of marginalized communities, such as hijras, dalits, and Kashmiris, shedding light on their struggles, aspirations, and lived experiences. This ethnographic approach allows the reader to gain a deeper understanding of the cultural and social dynamics at play in contemporary India.

Literature also serves as a medium for Roy to challenge and subvert dominant narratives. She uses storytelling techniques to disrupt mainstream discourses and present alternative perspectives. Roy

incorporates myths, fables, and oral histories, giving voice to marginalized communities and questioning the dominant power structures that shape society. In doing so, she addresses themes of power, oppression, and resistance. Furthermore, Roy employs a multi-perspective narrative structure in the novel, weaving together the stories of different characters whose lives intersect in complex ways. This narrative technique reflects the anthropological notion of holism, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of various elements within a society. By presenting multiple viewpoints, Roy highlights the diversity and complexity of Indian society, defying simplistic generalizations.

The novel also engages with anthropological concepts such as gender, kinship, and social hierarchies. Roy explores the fluidity of gender and challenges traditional notions of identity. Characters like Anjum embody alternative gender identities, blurring the boundaries between male and female. The exploration of kinship ties and communal relationships also mirrors anthropological studies of social structures and family dynamics.

In summary, in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Arundhati Roy blends elements of anthropology and literature to create a rich tapestry of stories and perspectives. Through her ethnographic approach, she offers a nuanced understanding of Indian society, while also challenging dominant narratives and exploring themes of power, oppression, and resistance. The novel serves as a powerful example of the ways in which literature can engage with anthropological concepts and contribute to social and political discourse.

In conclusion, the anthropological study of Arundhati Roy's novel "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness" provides valuable insights into the complex social, cultural, and political dynamics of contemporary India. By employing anthropological theory and perspectives, this research paper has explored various themes and concepts within the novel, highlighting the intersections of identity, power, resistance, and cultural diversity. Through an ethnographic approach, the novel offers a rich portrayal of marginalized communities and their struggles for recognition and agency. Roy's storytelling techniques disrupt dominant narratives, challenge binary oppositions, and present alternative perspectives, inviting readers to question societal norms and power structures. The multi-perspective narrative structure reflects the interconnectedness

of diverse individuals and communities, mirroring anthropological concepts of holism and social interconnectedness.

The application of anthropological theory has allowed for a deeper understanding of the cultural interpretation, identity construction, symbolism, social structures, and power dynamics depicted in the novel. It has enriched our analysis of the text, shedding light on the complexities of Indian society and the lived experiences of its diverse populations. This research paper highlights the fruitful intersection between anthropology and literature, demonstrating how the tools and concepts of anthropology can enhance our understanding and interpretation of literary works. By employing an anthropological lens, we gain a broader perspective on the intricate relationships between culture, society, and human behaviour, as depicted in Roy's novel.

Overall, the anthropological study of "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness" emphasizes the importance of recognizing and valuing diverse voices and experiences, and encourages us to critically examine the social and political realities in which literature is embedded. Through this exploration, we gain a deeper appreciation for the power of literature as a tool for social commentary and a catalyst for change.

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