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Diversity of Maternal Image in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

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Diversity of Maternal Image in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

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Abstract- Despite the rise of scholarly interest in maternal theory and observation, motherhood studies is a relatively new concern in India which has started over the last decade. Usually, the concept of "Motherhood" has the societal obsession with biological affinity associated with dominant social mores around "sacrosanct" marriage. Scholars of motherhood studies have tried to show the difference of mother, mothering and motherhood. They have included 'non-biological mother' in it, which has received less concern and, to some extent, no critical consideration. The theorization of "Motherhood", mostly under feminist consideration, was dealt by renowned scholars like Adrienne Rich, Sarah Ruddick and, Barbara Katz Rothman, who have tried to show motherhood in a different light, unlike the traditional representation of it. Collecting information from motherhood studies and queer theory, this article will focus on the diverse images of motherhood sketches by Man Booker-winning Indian writer Arundhati Roy in her second novel, The Ministry of Utmost Happiness. Apart from representing the traditional mother image as Jahanara Begum, this study will highlight non-biological and queer mother figures like Tilo, Anjum, Saeeda, Revaty and, Mariam Ipe to show the prevalence of diverse maternity outside the dominant paradigm of "Motherhood". Moreover, the diversification of maternal image in this study will showcase how the ideology of "Motherhood" is stereotyped and influenced by the hegemonic forces that are supported by the heteropatriarchal institutions of power. The diverse ideas of motherhood in this study will also challenge the prevailing heteronormative motherhood in the patriarchal society.

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I. Introduction

In her book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, Adrienne Rich states that, "All born of women are inevitably connected to motherhood, but cautions that the images, ideals, archetypes, and theories of the archetypal mother are sanctioned and promoted by patriarchal culture to reinforce the conservatism of motherhood as an 'institution' and so convert it to an energy for the renewal of male power" (*Rich, 15*). This quotation of Rich suggests that, the concept of *Motherhood* is flavored with patriarchal norms and expectations of society. Hence, the common definition of *Motherhood* declares it as a collective group, to the state of being a mother, and to the qualities attributed to mothers. So, it is quite clear that *Motherhood* is not simply biological or innate, instead, it is also a social institution that functions ideologically and politically. However, the study of "Motherhood" has come to light in the last few decades. *The Encyclopedia of Motherhood* states that, *Motherhood* has emerged within the academy in the previous thirty years as a significant issue of scholarly inquiry (*The Encyclopedia of Motherhood*, vol. 2, 831). Hence, with the advancement of time, the concept of *Motherhood* is also changing and expanding its consideration area. For understanding the true nature of *motherhood*, it is necessary to explore the use of the words: mother, mothering, and motherhood. These terms are interconnected but each of them underlines some different meaning and function. Mother is the individual, the identity of a person, and "mothering" can be defined as the action of taking care of the child. Lastly, *Motherhood* is generally understood as the social system in which mothering is performed. External forces like physical, social, emotional, and scientific forces are influential in the execution and establishment of the concept of motherhood. *Motherhood* in the patriarchal society is perceived as the biological inter-connectedness between the mother and child and, the mother is regarded as the sole caregiver of the child and the father is almost free from this responsibility. Sarah Hardy clarified this archetypical conception of motherhood by saying that, "the idea of a good mother is deployed through material and discursive spaces in order to mobilize subjectivities that are socially adapted and useful" (*Sarah Hardy, 16*). Thus, in the heteronormative social system, *Motherhood* turned into an institution of child care almost only by the mothers. Adrienne Rich exclaimed that, "[motherhood], the institution, has been a keystone of the most diverse social and political systems" (*Rich, 13*). The devaluation of motherhood in a patriarchal society is well described by Rothman, who stated, "Our bodies may be ours, but given the ideology of patriarchy, the bodies of mothers are not highly valued. The bodies are just the space in which genetic material matures into babies. In a patriarchal system, even if women own their bodies, it may not give them any real control in pregnancy. Women may simply be seen to own the space in which fetuses are housed" (*Rothman, 1994*). From the traditional point of view, it is noted that, *Motherhood* is a set of ideals determined by the established traditions and inherited history of a society, which sees women as

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primarily responsible for meeting their children's daily needs.

In the 21st century, due to political, cultural, and most of all, social developments, a variety of mother roles has emerged and made it impossible to define *Motherhood* exclusively. Several feminists and sociologists have differentiated between the act of giving birth, which implies the biological aspect of *Motherhood*, and the rearing of children, which means the sociological part of *Motherhood*. They argue that while the first is biologically possible for all women, the latter lies in their personal choice (*Maxwell, 3*). Thus, they have tried to emphasize that, *Motherhood* is related to more about upbringing and care of a child than giving birth. Martha Joy Rose makes this new idea of *Motherhood* more explicit by saying, "to reiterate, mothers are defined as those performing mothering labor within social constructions of motherhood: their individual perspectives and experiences as well as a framework of fluid and varying gender differentiations and the oppositional constraints imposed upon them" (*Rose, 30*). Thus, motherhood can be defined with a more fluid identity where anyone, who ensures a child's basic needs and safety, can occupy the place of mother. Sarah Ruddick expands the periphery of *Motherhood* by asserting that, like women, men can also perform the duty of a mother. She said, "A mother is a person who takes on responsibility for children's lives and for whom providing child care is a significant part of her or his working life" (*Ruddick, 40*). Rothman also goes beyond the concept of *Motherhood* based on gender, biology, or genetics by establishing the idea of the family based on "more than genetics, more than lineage," towards "families made interracially, interculturally, internationally, gay and lesbian, as alternative kinds of families" (*Rothman, 19*). As a mother, she expresses her dream of a world based on communal feelings regardless of discrimination. In her *Book of Life,* she asserts, "The world that I live in, and the world that I want for my children, is not a world of scattered isolated individuals, and not a world of walls. It is a world of communities, of social solidarity, of connectedness between individuals and between communities, a world in which people and communities grow from and into each other" (*Rothman, 233*). Hence, it can be seen that the renowned scholars of motherhood studies have challenged the pre-existing assumptions of *Motherhood* and introduced it with much fluidity. Considering their definition of *Motherhood*, a plethora of variations in mothers can be found which include typical mothers, single mothers, childless mothers, child-free mothers, LGBQ mother, and so on.

Arundhati Roy is one of the world's prominent writers who guides her pen to sketch the social evils and exceptional problems of society. She dreams of a world of equality that will free from subjugation and oppression. As a conscious observer of the age-old social norms, Roy could easily understand the inner mechanism of the patriarchal world that held women subordinate and less powerful. Along with representing numerous sociopolitical problems prevailing in the post-modern world, she also deals with gender role issues, which gets its clear expression in her second most striking novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness.* In this novel, she delineates transgender issues with other political issues prevailing in India. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* achieves its specificity by representing *Motherhood* in a different light. In this novel, she showcases some mother figures who fall beyond the norms of the established archetypical concepts of *Motherhood*. By introducing these non-traditional mothers, Roy tries to establish the idea that, for becoming a mother, one does not need to have any biological interconnectedness. Moreover, by representing queer mothers like Anjum and Saeeda, and a childless mother like Tilo, Roy has dismantled and challenged the fabricated, age-old patriarchal conception of *Motherhood.* This study will represent the diversity of maternal images created by Roy in the novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness,* and match those mother figures according to the above-mentioned categories of mothers.

II. Discussion

Erma Bombeck writes in her book *Motherhood: the Second Oldest Profession* that, "Motherhood is not a one-size-fits-all, a mold that is all-encompassing and means the same to all people … No mother is all good or all bad, all laughing or all serious, all loving or all angry. Ambivalence runs through their veins" (*Bombeck, 10*). This assertion of Bombeck suggests the diversity of *Motherhood* prevails in the contemporary world as present-day mothers are going through a time of transition. Arundhati Roy, the writer, and social activist, concentrated on penning down maternal issues with diverse topics such as India's nuclear weapons and American power giant Enron's activities in India. While talking about her principles of writing, she stated, addressing the audience at Sharjah International Book Fair, "I have never been particularly ambitious. I am not a careerist; I am not trying to get anywhere in a career. It is more important to engage with society, to live it, to have different experiences" (*The Indian Express*, 2012). Her social engagement leads her to scrutinize the exceptional and hidden issues and the problems of society. She has dealt with the sensitive issues like gender roles and motherhood. Roy has become successful in demonstrating her efficiency in walking beyond the circle. This mastery of dealing with almost untouchable issues gets its strong expression in her second novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness,* where she focuses on the dynamic representation of maternal images, most of which fall outside the traditional conception.

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Among the mother figures pictured in the novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness,* the most archetypical one is Jahanara Begum, the mother of Anjum. She is represented as the most submissive mother, who fulfills all the conditions of the patriarchal notion of *Motherhood*. She exemplifies best the term 'Motherhood as Institution' coined by renowned feminist scholar Adrienne Rich. In her book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Institution and Experience,* Rich has talked about *Motherhood,* which is reinforced by patriarchy. This notion of *Motherhood* doesn't seem to treat women as an individual human being. Jahanara is showcased as the submissive wife of Mulaqat Ali, who had to conceive the fourth baby after three daughters with the guilt of not bringing any male child into this world. Jahanara keeps obliging her husband and plays the role of an 'ideal mother'. While talking about the nature of motherhood as an institution, Rich asserts, "Institutionalized motherhood demands of women maternal 'instinct' rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realization, relation to others rather than the creation of self. Motherhood is 'sacred' so long as its offspring are 'legitimate'" (*Rich, 42*). All these requirements of *Motherhood* in a heteronormative circumstance are fulfilled by Jahanara Begum, who continues to obey her husband without any self-assertion. Rich also suggests that institutional *Motherhood* keeps the fathers free from childcare responsibilities. In contrast, the mothers always remain under tremendous pressure to provide the best health, education, and moral well-being to their children. Thus, when the hermaphrodite child Aftab was born, she voluntarily took all the guilt and responsibilities upon herself for giving birth to an 'abnormal' child. Keeping the secret of Aftab's gender, she lets Mulaqat Ali be free from all anxieties. Besides, when Mulaqat Ali decided to have Aftab a gender-changing surgery, she did not feel it essential to opine about it. When Anjum left home, as a mother, Jahanara could not claim before Mulaqat Ali for the stay of Anjum as an intersex in this house. She met Anjum secretly at Khawabgah without the knowledge of her husband. All these submissions of Jahanara Begum represent her as the best example of *Motherhood* as an institution.

Several scholars in the post-modern era have denied the idea of mother as the primary caregiver. For de-centering emphasis on the traditional, heteronormative family and establishing the intersections of *Motherhood*, they put more importance on the care for the child than the biological connectivity. Sara Ruddick, in her *Maternal Thinking* introduced the idea of an 'ethics of care', where mothers could work for world conciliation and the preservation of the life of all the children. Ruddick tried to show mothering as a 'work or practice' and she attempted to separate it from the act of giving birth. She declared that, this would allow the biological mothers to relinquish care of the child to others, perhaps the father or adoptive parents (*Ruddick, 76-94*). The scholarly experiment on alternative models of family and kinship leads to probing the theory and practices of non-biological, adoptive, and other non-normative forms of *Motherhood*, among which 'queer mother' is the most understudied area of research even these days. Margaret F. Gibson, in her work "Queer Mothers and the Question of Normalcy", diverted the readers' age-old concentration away from the presumed gender, family, and sexual relations of the dominant culture to a new ideology of *Motherhood* by including-

i) Women
ii) Who have queer sexual identities, particularly as lesbian, bisexual, and queer-identified (LBQ) women and/or women in romantic/sexual relationships with other women, and
iii) Who parent children, whether as adoptive parents, foster parents, birth or "biological" parents, social or "non-biological" parents, or stepparents, either with or without legal recognition (*Gibson, 12*).

Gibson also strengthened her idea of queer motherhood by stating that, "Queering motherhood must attend, not only to motherhood as it occurs in overarching discourses and institutional restrictions, but also to everyday activities, material inequities, and embodied relationships" (*Gibson, 10*). In the novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness,* Anjum, the transgender, adopted the girl named Zainab and reared her as a mother. She can be considered a queer mother, who deviated from all the established social norms about *Motherhood*. Roy shows the possibility of re-envisioning motherhood through the lens of "trans subjectivities" by representing Anjum's urge for being a mother. Her concern and unconditional love for Zainab serves to shed light on the oft-neglected stories of Hijra mothers in Indian society. Anjum helps all the outcasts and marginal people in the community by providing service through Jannat Guest House and Funeral Services. Hence, she turns into a universal mother figure. Her proclamation reveals her motherly instinct, "I am Anjuman. I'm a mehfil, I'm a gathering. Of everybody and nobody, of everything and nothing… Everyone's invited" (*Ministry, 8*).

The concept of trans parenting is demonstrated by another queer mother, Saeeda, who holds the following position concerning affection for Zainab. When Anjum left for Gujarat, her vacated place as a mother of Zainab was held by Saeeda. The significance of her mother role can easily be predicted when Zainab introduced her as 'mummy' and Anjum as 'Badi Mummy'. Later, Anjum consigned to Saeeda all her motherly responsibilities for Zainab and shifted to the graveyard. This collaborative parenting by this two transgender can be termed polymaternalism, which Shelley M. Park introduced as "a way of moving toward a notion of families as coalitional entities requiring practices of solidarity among and between the various

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inhabitants of diasporic homes" is validated in the novel in differing contexts (*Park, 13*). Through queer mothers like Anjum and Saeeda, Roy challenges the traditional concept of *Motherhood* and focuse on the lived reality of LGBTQI populations in India.

Another image of *Motherhood* can be added in motherhood studies by mentioning the single mothers, which is quite common in contemporary patriarchal social circumstances but never accepted as a part of normative parenting. Moreover, the term 'single mother' does not cover all the aspects and circumstances related to a single mother. Valerie Heffernan & Gay Wilgus tried to demonstrate the limitations of the concept of a single mother by stating that,

> We recognize the myriad ways in which mothers can find themselves parenting alone, whether by circumstance or by choice, as well as the multiple ways in which this can affect their mothering decisions and identities. We use the blanket term 'single mothers' here in full knowledge of its shortcomings, but as a means of pointing to how culture, the media and public discourse have tended to marginalize mothers whose family situations do not follow normative patterns, and make sweeping assumptions about their experiences (*Valerie Heffernan & Gay Wilgus, 4-5*).

Hence, it can be assumed that, a single mother does not mean only being the mother of a fatherless child, rather, there may be some unnoticed, unaccepted patriarchal circumstances that compel a mother to be single. Contemporary critiques have also asserted that single mothers can be single either by personal choice or by some forces of social norms. In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness,* Maryam Ipe, a Syrian Christian and mother of Tilo, is such a kind of single mother who has given birth to Tilo without wedlock. Due to the conservatism and social stigma that entails unwed *Motherhood* in India, Tilo herself was adopted by her unmarried biological mother. Here, the transition of biological *Motherhood* into disguised queer motherhood occurs due to the social forces supported by patriarchal ideology. However, Maryam remained single but at the same time fulfilled the responsibility of a mother by rearing Tilo. Thus, she challenged the mainstream ideology of *Motherhood*.

The twentieth century saw a cultural shift from an understanding of *Motherhood* as a social expectation, a 'civic duty' towards its conception as a lifestyle choice. At the same time, the terms 'voluntary childlessness', 'childless by choice', and 'child-free' have emerged since the 1970s as counter-discourses to the traditional narrative of childlessness (*Plant, 7*). From this statement by Plant, two diverse images of *Motherhood* can be traced. One is 'voluntary childlessness' and another is "child-free". Irene Reti, in her introduction of the book *Childless by Choice: A Feminist Anthology (1992),* stated, "Women who choose not to have children 'live in the negative, in the absence, always on the defensive. The women whose voices are represented in the anthology offer many different explanations for their decisions to live child-free (*Reti, 1*). Thus, it can be said that childlessness may be either voluntary or non-voluntary. In some very exceptional cases, the mother can choose to be a disguised child-free mother for the safety of the child. In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness,* Revathy, a female guerrilla member of the outlawed Communist Party (Maoist) in Andhra Pradesh, refuses to adopt *Motherhood* forced upon her by the agents of a state in the most brutal way possible. Notably, she does not terminate her pregnancy, nor does she resign herself to the life of a traditional mother. Instead, for the baby's safety, she brings her to Delhi, far away from the dangerous geopolitics of Andhra Pradesh. In this way, Revathy fulfills her role as the biological mother by giving birth but renouncing her institutional duty of *Motherhood* by refusing to nurture a child born out of a violent rape. The concept of a child-free mother gets its best expression through Revathy.

Arundhati Roy's novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness,* not only depicts women who are queer, but also women, who adopt *Motherhood* in extraordinary circumstances. Thus, they strongly deviate from the norms of biologically induced *Motherhood* or *Motherhood* within the realm of heteronormative marriage. Tilo is one of the most important characters who depict 'voluntary childlessness' (biologically) and contradicts the conventional construction of *Motherhood*. Tilo demonstrates non-biological *Motherhood,* which is one of the areas of concern for sociologists and scholars of maternal studies. Dorothy Dinnerstein is one of the scholars, who denies biologically-based notions of *Motherhood,* and assertes that, *Motherhood* is a social practice which alters. She considered that the subordination of women was directly related to the social requirement for them to nurture their children, a problem increased by the extended period of dependence on human infants (*Dorothy Dinnerstein, 112*). Even after being married for 14 years, Tilo does not give birth to her biological child deliberately. She herself is a queer child who is adopted by her biological mother. Tilo's mother never admitted to public that, Tilo is her natural child. As a result, the mother-child bondage between them is never intense. Mother-blaming theory is applicable to demonstrate the cause of Tilo's disconnection from her mother and her decision to embrace non-biological *Motherhood*. John Bowlby was an influential scholar who argued that infant's care at the early age are very important for the mental health of the child. The theory of maternal deprivation was developed by him, who argued that, a child could be damaged if, for any reason, he/she is deprived of mother's care for at least the first three years of life (*John Bowlby, 13*). Hence, Maryam's inadmissible attitude towards Tilo affects her psychologically, which influences her to decide to renounce biological

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Motherhood. Thus, even after being pregnant with her Kashmiri lover Musa's child, she decides to undergo an abortion because she does not "wish to inflict herself on a child" (*Roy, 397*). But Tilo does not avoid *Motherhood*. She kidnaps a baby from the streets of Jantar Mantar in Delhi, and ensured her safety by providing proper care. In this way, Tilo introduces herself as a newly separated single woman who has never given birth. Her bold choice of renouncing biological *Motherhood* and picking up an abandoned girl from the street showcased her as a woman of denying the concept of conventional heteropatriarchal family. Tilo took shelter in Jannat Guest House, where she and Anjum collaboratively raised the adoptive baby, whom they named Baby Udaya Jabeen. Anjum and Tilo's act of adopting a non-biological child and collaborative concern for their positionality and safety in the heteronormative world puts more emphasis on their choice of *Motherhood*. This colaborative parenting is termed "chosen parenting" by Laura V. Heston that puts much emphasis on individuals with no biological or legal ties to the children they are parenting and additionally with no "romantic connection to their child's other parents" (*Heston, 255*).

III. Conclusion

The traditional notion of *Motherhood* in the male chauvinistic society holds mothers as the sole caregiver of their biological offspring, and ignore the individuality and potentiality of mothers. Defining *Motherhood* following any fixed ideology is quite tricky since mothers find themselves in multiple roles with the advancement of time. Consequently, diverse images of *Motherhood* can be found outside the heteronormative mother role. Most scholars and theorists of motherhood studies have agreed that motherhood studies should not be limited to the area of biological spare. *Motherhood* is not only bondage based on physical connectivity, but also responsibilities for ensuring the child's safe future. Many influential scholars root their arguments in a maternal body, while some others argue that, *Motherhood* cannot simply be ignored as a gender-specific and probably gender-constructing experience. The critiques of the modern era suggests to evaluate mothering as a symbolic act, a social position, available to any, and all who choose to do maternal work. Arundhati Roy is a socialist writer who has observed *Motherhood* in as many diverse ways as she can. She surpasses all the borders of age-old patriarchal norms concerning *Motherhood*. She tries to sketch a realistic image of diversified *Motherhood* through the characters who do not fit into to standardized rules and regulations of society. Thus, by creating characters like Anjum and Saeeda, Roy shows that transgender can be a mother. The 'born to be free character' like Tilo, challenges the patriarchal notion of *Motherhood* and demonstrates that a woman can choose not to give birth to her child or she may do opposite. Maryam Ipe and Revaty unfold the dark norms of society by showing how the societal obsession with *Motherhood* based on sacred marriage forced a mother to turn her biological child into an adoptive one. The helplessness and subjugation of a typical mother is masterfully represented by Jahanara Begum. All these atypical mothers work as mouthpieces for Roy to unfold the true nature of motherhood and suggest changing the stereotypical idea of *Motherhood*.

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