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The Unclaimed and the Unconsoled: A Comparative Dialectic of Dalit and Subaltern Articulation in Ajay Navariya's *Unclaimed Terrain* and Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

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Abstract

This research paper presents an exhaustive comparative analysis of contemporary Dalit and Subaltern literature through the lens of two pivotal texts: Ajay Navariya's short story collection Unclaimed Terrain (2013) and Arundhati Roy's novel The Ministry of Utmost Happiness (2017). The study navigates the user's query regarding "Unclaimed Baggage"—a metaphor employed by Roy to describe the precarious lives of her characters—and juxtaposes it with Navariya's Unclaimed Terrain, a seminal work of urban Dalit realism. By interrogating the theoretical and aesthetic divergences between Roy's "representation from without" and Navariya's "articulation from within," this report argues that while Subaltern Studies offers a framework for understanding the "failure of the nation-state," it remains methodologically insufficient for capturing the militant, modern consciousness of the Dalit political identity. Through a close reading of characters like Anjum, Tilo, and Saddam Hussain in Roy's "Ministry," and the bureaucratic protagonists of Navariya's "New Custom," "Tattoo," and "Hello Premchand," this paper delineates how the "Subaltern" is constructed, deconstructed, and reclaimed in the literary imagination of twenty-first-century India. The analysis extends to the politics of translation, the psychology of caste in neoliberal spaces, and the intersectionality of gender, religious, and regional marginalization, ultimately positing that the "Unclaimed" is not merely a category of neglect, but a terrain of fierce political contestation.

Keywords: Dalit Literature, Subaltern Studies, Arundhati Roy, Ajay Navariya, Unclaimed Terrain, The Ministry of Utmost Happiness, Caste, Intersectionality, Postcolonialism, Urban Dalit, Psycho-geography, Laura Brueck, B.R. Ambedkar, Critical Caste Studies.

Introduction

The landscape of contemporary Indian literature is increasingly defined by a confrontation with the "unclaimed"—those histories, bodies, and territories that the postcolonial nation-state has systematically erased, marginalized, or failed to integrate. In the literary topography of the twenty-first century, two distinct yet overlapping theoretical frameworks have emerged to map this terrain: the project of Subaltern Studies, which seeks to recover the voices of the "non-elite" from the silence of historiography, and the movement of Dalit Literature, which asserts a militant, assertive identity rooted in the anti-caste philosophy of B.R. Ambedkar. While these frameworks share a commitment to the marginalized, they diverge fundamentally in their methods, their politics, and their aesthetics.

This research paper undertakes a rigorous comparison of these two modes of articulation through a comparative analysis of Arundhati Roy's novel The Ministry of Utmost Happiness (2017) and Ajay Navariya's short story collection Unclaimed Terrain (2013). The inquiry is framed by a productive ambiguity in the user's query, which references "Unclaimed Baggage" in relation to Navariya. In reality, Unclaimed Terrain is the title of Navariya's

collection, translated by Laura Brueck 1, while "unclaimed baggage" is a potent metaphor used by Roy in The Ministry of Utmost Happiness. In a haunting passage, Roy describes birds sitting on power lines, "like unclaimed baggage at the airport," suggesting a state of suspension, belonging to no one, waiting for a destination that may never arrive.[2] This accidental linguistic convergence serves as the conceptual anchor for this study: How do Roy and Navariya differently imagine the "unclaimed"? For Roy, the unclaimed are the "unconsoled"—the romantic, tragic victims of a failed republic. For Navariya, the "unclaimed terrain" is the psychological landscape of the modern Dalit—a space that mainstream literature has refused to enter, and which the Dalit subject must now aggressively map and conquer.[3]

Arundhati Roy, writing in English as a globally celebrated intellectual, constructs a "Ministry" for the disparate subalterns of India—Hijras, Dalits, Kashmiris, and Tribals. Her narrative is centrifugal, expanding outward to encompass the entirety of the nation's fractures.[4] In contrast, Ajay Navariya, writing in Hindi from the specific vantage point of the urban Dalit middle class, constructs a narrative that is centripetal, drilling down into the "psychological fissure" of the caste-marked self.[5]Navariya's characters are not the "poorest of the poor" often fetishized in subaltern theory; they are bureaucrats, professors, and gym-goers who navigate the "urban uncanny" where caste is officially abolished but socially omnipresent.[6]

This report will argue that the distinction between "Subaltern" and "Dalit" is not merely semantic but structural. Roy's work operates within the logic of Subalternity, emphasizing the shared vulnerability of all marginalized groups against the state. Navariya's work operates within the logic of Dalit Consciousness, emphasizing the specific, irreducible antagonism of caste that persists even when the subaltern enters the state. Through a detailed textual analysis, this paper will demonstrate how these two texts offer competing visions of resistance: one rooted in the "solidarity of the broken" [7], and the other in the "assertion of the self".[8]

Theoretical Framework

To understand the divergence between Roy and Navariya, it is essential to map the theoretical genealogy of the terms "Subaltern" and "Dalit," as their literary deployments are deeply entangled with their political histories.

- The Subaltern Studies Project and the Limits of Recovery

The term "subaltern," originally appropriated from Antonio Gramsci by the Subaltern Studies Group (SSG) led by Ranajit Guha in the 1980s, was intended to denote the "general attribute of subordination" in South Asian society.[9] Guha and his colleagues sought to write a "history from below," recovering the agency of the peasant insurgent that had been ignored by both colonial and nationalist elitist historiographies.

The Indefinable Subaltern: Guha argued that there were "vast areas in the life and consciousness of the people" that were never integrated into elite hegemony.[9] The subaltern was defined by what it was not—not elite, not state-centered, not archival.

Spivak's Intervention: The project took a seismic turn with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's 1988 essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?". Spivak critiqued the SSG's essentialist desire to recover a "pure" subaltern voice, arguing that the subaltern is structurally silenced by the epistemic violence of colonialism and patriarchy. She famously concluded that "the subaltern cannot speak"—meaning that even when they speak, their speech is mediated, interpreted, and co-opted by the dominant discourse.[10]

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The Caste Blind Spot: A major critique of the Subaltern Studies project, particularly from Dalit scholars, is its failure to adequately theorize caste. By subsuming caste under "class" or "peasantry," the SSG often ignored the specific ritual pollution and social segregation that define the Dalit experience.[10] As Barman and Barman note, Spivak's assertion that the subaltern cannot speak is "partially, if not totally, wrong" in the context of Dalit literature, which has been speaking vociferously in vernacular languages for decades.[10]

- Dalit Aesthetics: The Assertion of Consciousness

Dalit Literature emerges not from the academic seminar rooms of Postcolonial Studies but from the activism of the Dalit Panthers and the Ambedkarite movement in Maharashtra in the 1960s and 70s.

Definition: SharankumarLimbale, in his foundational text Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature, defines it as "writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness".[8] This "consciousness" is key—it is a revolutionary, rationalist, and humanist perspective derived from B.R. Ambedkar's philosophy.

Rejection of Sympathy: A central tenet of Dalit aesthetics is the rejection of "sympathy" (sahanubhuti) from upper-caste writers. Premchand, the stalwart of Hindi realism, is often criticized by Dalit critics for portraying Dalits as passive victims deserving of pity.[11] Dalit literature demands "authenticity of experience" (swaanubhuti). It asserts that only those who have lived the pain of caste can articulate it truthfully.

The Modern Turn: While early Dalit literature (like Om Prakash Valmiki's Joothan) focused on the atrocities of the village, contemporary writers like Ajay Navariya have shifted focus to the city. They explore how caste functions in the modern, secular republic, challenging the assumption that urbanization equals emancipation.[12]

- The Intersection of Frameworks in the Texts

Roy's The Ministry of Utmost Happiness can be read as a "Subaltern Studies" novel. It is obsessed with the "failure" of the nation-state and the silencing of its subjects.[4] Roy acts as the "intellectual intermediary" that Spivak warns against, yet she attempts to use her privilege to "turn up the volume" on subaltern voices. Navariya's Unclaimed Terrain, conversely, is a "Dalit Studies" text. It is not interested in the "failure" of the state per se—in fact, many of his characters are the state (bureaucrats). It is interested in the resilience of the caste mind. Navariya does not need to "recover" a voice; he assumes the voice is already there, loud and ironic.[13]

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

Arundhati Roy's second novel is a sprawling, chaotic, and ambitious attempt to map the "neurobiology" of the Indian state's violence. It constructs a counter-narrative to the "India Shining" discourse, focusing instead on the "unconsoled"—the debris left behind by progress.

- Anjum and the Jannat Guest House: The Subaltern Heterotopia

The novel's primary protagonist, Anjum (born Aftab), is a Hijra (transgender woman). Her narrative arc moves from the "Khwabgah" (House of Dreams) in Old Delhi to a graveyard where she establishes the "Jannat Guest House" (Paradise Guest House).

The Graveyard as Subaltern Space: The Jannat Guest House serves as a powerful metaphor for the subaltern condition. It is a "heterotopia"—a space that exists outside the normative order of the city (the "Duniya") but reflects and inverts it.[7] In the graveyard, the living and the dead coexist. The strict boundaries of caste, religion, and gender that police the

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"Duniya" are suspended. It becomes a refuge for the "unclaimed"—unclaimed bodies, unclaimed histories, and unclaimed genders.[7]

Gendered Subalternity: Anjum's subalternity is somatic; it is inscribed on her body. Roy describes her as "She-He, He-She," a being who defies the binary logic of the census and the nation-state.[15] Her survival of the Gujarat pogroms—where she is spared only because her killers fear the bad luck of killing a Hijra—highlights the precarious nature of her existence. She is saved not by her rights as a citizen, but by the superstition of her oppressors.[4]

The Limits of Representation: Roy's portrayal of Anjum has been praised for its empathy but also critiqued for its potential to "romanticize" the margins. By placing the subaltern utopia in a graveyard, does Roy suggest that the subaltern can only find freedom in death or in the spaces of death? The "Jannat Guest House" risks becoming a magical realist construct that obfuscates the gritty, un-magical reality of Hijra life.[16]

- Saddam Hussain (Dayachand): The Dalit Avenger and the Spectacle of Violence

The character of Saddam Hussain offers the most direct engagement with the Dalit question in Roy's novel. Born Dayachand to a Chamar (tanner) family in Haryana, he reinvents himself after a traumatic event.

The Primal Scene of Lynchings: Dayachand witnesses his father's lynching by a mob of upper-caste "cow protectors" (Gau Rakshaks). His father is accused of killing a cow he was transporting. Roy describes this scene with visceral, cinematic detail, emphasizing the "performative" nature of modern caste violence—it is violence meant to be seen, filmed, and circulated.[17] The snippet mentions the "video of young Dalit men... flinging cow carcasses," which Saddam shows Anjum. This is a reference to the real-life Una flogging incident and the subsequent Dalit uprising, demonstrating Roy's strategy of fictionalizing contemporary news reports.[17]

The Politics of Naming: Dayachand abandons his Hindu name and adopts "Saddam Hussain"—not out of Islamic piety, but out of admiration for the Iraqi dictator's "courage and dignity... in the face of death".[14] This is a profound "second-order insight" into the subaltern psyche. The Dalit subject, alienated from the Indian nation that murders his father, identifies with the global pariah, the enemy of the West. It signifies a complete rejection of the "liberal" order. Saddam Hussain (the character) chooses a name that is universally reviled to mark his own permanent exclusion.[19]

Conversion as Resistance: Saddam's conversion to Islam echoes B.R. Ambedkar's famous declaration in 1935: "I was born a Hindu, but I will not die a Hindu." However, unlike Ambedkar's mass conversion to Buddhism (a rationalist, indigenous faith), Saddam's conversion to Islam is singular and rage-fueled. Roy suggests that for the contemporary Dalit, Islam offers a militant "otherness" that Buddhism might no longer provide in the popular imagination.[14]

Critique of Characterization: Despite the power of his backstory, some critics argue that Saddam Hussain functions more as a "vehicle for information" than a fully realized psychological subject. His dialogues often serve to "explain" caste atrocities to the reader (and to Anjum), turning him into a "native informant".[18] His relationship with Anjum, however, offers a vision of "inter-subaltern solidarity"—a Dalit man and a Hijra woman finding common ground in their shared dispossession.[15]

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- Kashmir: The Spatial Subaltern

Roy extends the concept of subalternity from the social (caste/gender) to the spatial (geography). Kashmir is depicted as a "subaltern space"—a zone of exception where the rule of law is suspended.[20]

Tilo and the Body Politic: Tilo (Tilottama), the novel's other protagonist, is an architect and observer who becomes entangled in the Kashmir conflict through her love for Musa, a militant. Tilo's body becomes a site of state inscription. In a harrowing scene, her hair is shaved by ACP Pinky Sodhi, a female police officer. This act of "tonsuring" is a "primordial punishment" meant to de-sex and humiliate the recalcitrant woman.[21]

The Unclaimed Dead: The novel is haunted by "unclaimed bodies"—the victims of encounters, tortures, and disappearances in Kashmir. Roy writes, "The dead are not dead. They are just living in my head".[22] The Jannat Guest House becomes the repository for these unclaimed histories. Here, Roy links the "unclaimed" Dalit (Saddam) with the "unclaimed" Kashmiri (Musa's daughter, Miss Jebeen the Second), suggesting a pan-Indian "alliance of the oppressed".[23]

Ajay Navariya's *Unclaimed Terrain*

If Roy's novel is a "macro" view of the nation's failure, Ajay Navariya's stories offer a "micro" view of the caste self. Moving away from the rural "atrocity narrative" that defined earlier Dalit literature, Navariya focuses on the "urban uncanny"—the subtle, psychological violence that pervades the modern city.

- "New Custom": The Mutation of Caste in Modernity

In the story "New Custom" (Naya Riwaj), the protagonist is an educated, well-dressed university professor. He stops at a tea stall in a village, assuming his class markers—sunglasses, western clothes—will protect him from caste scrutiny.

The Tea Stall as Threshold: The tea stall owner initially treats him with respect, misidentifying him as a "Sahib." However, upon realizing the protagonist is a "Harijan" (a term the protagonist despises), the owner's demeanor shifts instantly. He does not beat the protagonist; instead, he enforces a "new custom." He makes the protagonist wash his own glass.[6]

Modernity vs. Feudalism: This scene powerfully dismantles the Nehruvian myth that "modernity" (education, urbanization) will dissolve caste. Navariya shows that caste is mutable. It adapts. The "new custom" is a bureaucratic, sanitized form of untouchability that avoids physical violence but inflicts deep psychological humiliation.[24]

The Urban/Rural Divide: The story also critiques the "sink of localism" that is the Indian village (an Ambedkarite phrase). For the Dalit, the village is not a pastoral idyll but a site of trauma. The protagonist's journey from the city back to the village is a journey back into vulnerability.[5]

- "Tattoo": The Semiotics of Passing and Shame

"Tattoo" (Godna) is perhaps the most psychologically acute story in the collection. The protagonist, Subhash Kumar, is a senior bureaucrat (Undersecretary). He joins an upscale gym in Delhi's posh Khan Market.

The Gym as Panopticon: The gym is ostensibly a secular, casteless space dedicated to the body. Yet, for Subhash, it is a space of terror. He is obsessed with hiding two things: his cheap, tattered shoes (markers of his past poverty) and a tattoo on his arm that reads "Namo Buddhaya, Jai Bhim".[25]

The Paradox of Symbols: The tattoo is a symbol of Dalit pride—"Namo Buddhaya" refers to the conversion to Buddhism initiated by Ambedkar, and "Jai Bhim" is the slogan of the movement. Yet, in the elite, upper-caste space of the gym, Subhash experiences these symbols as markers of shame. He fears they will "out" him as a reservation beneficiary.[26]

The Imposter Syndrome: Navariya masterfully depicts the "imposter syndrome" of the first-generation Dalit middle class. Subhash feels he does not belong. His "silence" and "reserve" are defense mechanisms. The story exposes the internal policing the Dalit subject performs. The oppression is no longer just external (the mob); it is internal (the anxiety). The "unclaimed terrain" here is the protagonist's own body, which he cannot fully claim because it is marked by caste.[27]

- "Hello Premchand": Rewriting the Canon

"Hello Premchand" is a meta-fictional tour de force in which the narrator speaks to the ghost of Munshi Premchand, the legendary Hindi writer known as the "Emperor of Novels."

The Critique of Sympathy: Premchand is famous for his stories like "Kafan" (The Shroud) and "Sadgati" (Deliverance), which depict Dalits as tragic, passive victims. Navariya's narrator challenges this depiction. He argues that Premchand's realism was "casteized"—it locked Dalits into a "circumscribed narrative arc" of suffering and death.[11]

Literary Revanchism: In the story, the narrator rewrites the fate of Mangal, a character from Premchand'sGodan. In Navariya's version, Mangal does not die in misery; he goes to the city, gets an education, and becomes a powerful bureaucrat. He drives a car. He talks back. This is an act of "literary revanchism"—reclaiming the character from his upper-caste creator.[28]

Intertextuality as Resistance: By engaging directly with Premchand, Navariya asserts that Dalit literature is not just a "marginal" category but a central participant in the Indian literary tradition. It is a "counter-canon" that corrects the distortions of the past.[29]

Comparative Analysis: Divergences in Representation

The juxtaposition of The Ministry of Utmost Happiness and Unclaimed Terrain reveals the fundamental tensions between the "Subaltern" and "Dalit" modes of representation.

- The Gaze: Sympathy vs. Solidarity vs. Self-Articulation

Roy's Gaze (The Outsider): Roy writes from a position of "solidarity." As a non-Dalit, she cannot claim the lived experience of caste. Her portrayal of Saddam Hussain is deeply empathetic, but it relies on "spectacular" events (lynching, conversion) to define him. Critics like Suraj Yengdeand others have noted that while Roy's allyship is valuable, it can sometimes risk "fetishizing" Dalit pain for a global audience.[16] Her narrative gaze is compassionate, looking at the subaltern with a desire to protect and memorialize.

Navariya's Gaze (The Insider): Navariya's gaze is "ironic" and "unsparing." He drills down into the Dalit psyche with a precision that does not seek to flatter. His characters are not saints; they are flawed, anxious, and sometimes petty (e.g., Subhash in "Tattoo" is ashamed of his own people). This complexity makes them "human" in a way that the symbolic Saddam Hussain sometimes fails to be. Navariya looks from the Dalit subject, capturing the messy reality of lived experience.[12]

- The Politics of Language and Translation

English as the Language of the "Unconsoled": Roy writes in English, the language of the global elite, but also a language Ambedkarites view as a tool of liberation ("The milk of the

tigress"). Roy's English is lush, lyrical, and metaphorical. It translates the raw pain of India into a "consumable" literary aesthetic for the world.[31]

Hindi and the "Double Translation": Navariya writes in Hindi, the vernacular. However, his global reception is mediated by Laura Brueck's English translation. Brueck notes the irony that many Indian elites read Navariya only in English.[29] This raises questions about the "target audience." Is Navariya writing for Dalits, or is he writing to "explain" the Dalit to the Savarna (upper-caste) and Western reader? The story "Hello Premchand" suggests he is writing to the Hindi canon, demanding entry and correction.[29]

- The Metaphor of the "Unclaimed"

Unclaimed Baggage (Roy): In Ministry, the "unclaimed" are passive objects—birds, bodies, souls waiting for redemption. Roy's project is to be their "Ministry," their custodian. The mood is elegiac.

Unclaimed Terrain (Navariya): In Navariya's work, the "unclaimed terrain" is a frontier to be conquered. It is the psychological space of the modern city that Dalits have entered but not yet fully "claimed" as their own. The mood is anxious but assertive. The Dalit is not "baggage" to be collected; he is a traveler fighting for his seat on the train.

Conclusion:

The comparison of Arundhati Roy's The Ministry of Utmost Happiness and Ajay Navariya's Unclaimed Terrain illustrates the complexity of representing the marginalized in twenty-first-century India. Roy utilizes the framework of Subaltern Studies to construct a "museum of the marginalized," where Dalits, Hijras, and Kashmiris are united by their shared exclusion from the nation-state. Her work is a powerful act of solidarity, a "counter-memorial" to the victims of progress.

However, Ajay Navariya's work demonstrates the limitations of the "Subaltern" label. His characters are not "voices from the margins"; they are voices from the center—the government office, the university, the market. Yet, they remain "unclaimed" by the social contract of caste. Navariya's Dalit Aesthetic refuses the "tragedy" narrative, offering instead a complex, ironic, and often uncomfortable look at the "psychic costs" of caste.

While Roy's Saddam Hussain acts out a "spectacle" of resistance (changing his name, avenging his father), Navariya's Subhash Kumar performs the "quiet" resistance of survival—hiding his tattoo, doing his job, and refusing to be defined solely by his oppression. The transition from the "Subaltern" (who is defined by silence) to the "Dalit" (who is defined by voice) marks the evolution of Indian political literature. As Navariya's narrator tells the ghost of Premchand: "I am not your character anymore. I am the author of my own story."

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