

Unveiling Queer Spaces: A Narrative Against Societal Taboos in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

Roshaan Khalid PhD (scholar) English Literature University of Management and Technology,
Lecturer, English University of Lahore

roshaan.khalid@ell.uol.edu.pk

Arslan Ahmed

Department of Languages and Linguistics, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia

arslan.ahmad1@students.mq.edu.au

Maryam Siddique

Lecturer, Department of English, Rashid Latif Khan University

maryam.siddique@rlku.edu.pk

Abstract

*This research primarily focuses on the identity/ place of the intersex community and its treatment by other genders. Contemporary South Asian writers are making efforts to write about societal taboos to confront and demolish stereotypical thinking of society. Arundhati Roy, who is known for activism, has voiced certain social, political, and environmental issues about India through her critically engaging works. Her novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* brings forward queer narratives and subversive perspectives set against the backdrop of the present-day Indian society. It touches upon the concept of queer spaces and explores themes of marginalization and identity crisis being witnessed in these spaces. People belonging to this community are not considered an equal and legitimate part of society. They live among other people but receive alienated treatment from them. As a consequence, they adopt an anti-normative way of living while struggling as marginalized entities (third gender) against the established standards and pretenses of Indian culture. However, Arundhati Roy's intersex characters represent a journey of survival, revolt, and liberation from those stereotypes that dehumanize them.*

Keywords: Marginalized, queer, stereotypical, dehumanize, corruption

Introduction

Speaking of the queer spaces, Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* navigates the intricacies of queer identity and harsh heteronormative structures and struggles to rebuild these spaces through resistance. She has aesthetically weaved the whole range of incidents from different parts of Indian society. In this way, in her long-awaited second novel, she has beautifully used her language to articulate her socio-political philosophy. To put it differently, she has successfully become the voice of the marginalized, the untouchables, the outcasts, and the oppressed classes. The novel is divided into two parts. The first part deals with the *Hijra* community and the second part deals with the conflicting Kashmir movement. Despite these two major divisions, Roy also included events such as the post-emergency period in India, the social unrest in Punjab, highlights of 9/11, and references to anti-Dalit incidents. The account of these incidents is an indication of Roy's socio-political tendencies.

One of the major issues, mentioned in the novel, is the questionable place of the transgender community in Indian society. By employing the concepts of queer theory, we aim to unravel the complexities of power dynamics, privilege, and marginalization that shape the experiences of queer characters within the novel. Furthermore, we seek to highlight how Roy's narrative disrupts conventional notions of queerness, offering a nuanced portrayal that challenges essentialist perspectives and celebrates the diversity of queer experiences. The research also highlights their struggle for survival in society and how the privileged class subjugates the

underprivileged class. Equally important is to see the ideology behind this fact which is a socially constructed concept. The concept of biological characteristics is not socially constructed, but it is the stigma that is attached to them. Judith Butler considered gender “a culturally informed training of the body” rather than a biological phenomenon (qtd. in Jaffer 180). Such a social attitude does not motivate transgenders to cherish their lives but leaves them in despair.

Apart from South Asian society, European societies also experienced a similar social attitude. The contemporary world tells us that European culture gives freedom and talks about gender equality, but their history speaks of gender discrimination. During open discussions on the idea of co-education, there were vehement opponents in South America. Amy Thompson McCandless highlights the reasons to hinder coeducation. She writes that “Women’s educational progress in the South was also hindered by regional sexual stereotypes” (McCandless 201). Thompson further quotes the protester’s views on the same issue. When Governor Ben Tillman of South Carolina suggested in 1893 to make the state college at Columbia co-educational, the Charleston News and Courier protested and said, “Our people still believe in manly men and womanly women ... the story of coeducation at South Carolina College illustrates how traditional conceptions of gender and race influenced academic polity” (Jaffer 202). The paper attempts to highlight the role of culture in numbing the transgender community and its capacity to confront those adversities mentioned in the novel. In this scenario, Anjum, a transgender, is the center of the study to analyze her lifestyle to demonstrate how she formed an anti-normative way of living not only for herself but for other marginalized people also. Traditional conceptions of gender do not only affect the educational institutes but the overall society. With this in mind, Anjum can be seen when she was Aftab and started a music academy. Aftab is mistreated and ridiculed by the other fellows in the music academy, and Aftab leaves the academy when it goes beyond limits. “He’s a She. He’s not a He or a She. He’s a He and a She. She – He, He – She Hee! Hee! Hee! When the teasing became unbearable Aftab stopped going to his music classes” (Roy 13).

This paper delves into the journey of transgender (Anjum) who makes efforts to build an anti-normative path and save other transgender as well as other minorities in society. Although minorities are not voiceless, their voices are silenced by society. Without social norms, one cannot be recognized, and norms are set to make identities. Moreover, these norms change with time which define what does or does not conform to society. The recognition of transgender can also be made purified without any stigma, and they can live life without discrimination. It depends upon society how it changes attitudes and accepts new norms to console them. Social identity and recognition do not harm, but there is social stigma and ridicule associated with it. Every individual is given a particular identity at the time of birth by his/her family and then he is recognized by those identities assigned to them by the society. James D. Fearon says that “identity in its present incarnation has a double sense. It refers at the same time to social categories and to the sources of an individual’s self-respect or dignity” (n. p.).

As Anjum is the one transgender who neither remains silent nor leaves herself to the kindness of others, and she fights against the cultural norms and standards of Indian society. Eventually, she decided to abandon the norms of society to start a new journey to help others unconsolated. She does not confine her help to the transgender community only, but she welcomes all other communities that are discarded by society. She establishes a place in the graveyard where people of different religions, castes, creeds, and genders are welcomed without any discrimination. Jannat Guest House, the graveyard where Anjum lives, becomes a place where

everybody is free to come and live. Services such as funeral prayer and other burial rituals are given under the banner of Jannat Guest House. In this way, it flourishes as a society where people from all parts of society such as Hindu, Muslim, Transgender, and Dalit take refuge. It will further analyze the way Roy has criticized the South-Asian, particularly Indian society's attitudes towards the marginalized and underprivileged people, which will be elaborated through the characters presented in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*.

Literature Review

The transgender community is the most neglected one in our South-Asian society. Identity in terms of gender has a significant role in defining the prospects of an individual in a patriarchal society. Every person has an identity either "he" or "she", but there is no place for the third gender in our society. They are discarded from society since they do not fit in any category of "he" and "she". It is impossible to survive without an identity or having an identity that is not accepted socially. James D. Fearon refers to identity as, "a social category, defined by membership rules and (alleged) characteristic attributes or expected behaviors or socially distinguishing features that a person takes a special pride in our views as unchangeable but socially consequential" (n. p.).

Another article based on Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* written by Sushree Smita Raj shows that Roy's fiction highlights implicitly unrestrained powers of patriarchy. She states that in the fiction of Roy, we see a glimpse of contemporary India that is opposite to principles of tolerance and secularism. She thinks that India has turned into a fascist state because of its intolerance (Raj 3). The existing study has pointed out different forms of atrocities in the novel, but the novel hasn't explored yet the atrocities of exile.

Moreover, Inakali Assumi explores postcolonial narratives in the novel which helps to develop the arguments. She tries to apply Bhaba's theory and states "The quest for identity and a sense of belongingness is not only prominent in Anjum but is also visible in Tilo and this is another characteristic of Postcolonialism" (Assumi 54). The following study explores the efforts of Roy to enlighten the factors that contribute to the marginalization of poor citizens. According to Grewal in *Home and the World: The Multiple Citizenship of Arundhati Roy*, her writing helps us to dissect the inequality among the citizens. The religious, political, and historical inequalities are the factors that are responsible for nuisance in this world (Grewal 159).

Claire Pamment in her article, *Hijraism: Jostling for a third space in Pakistani politics*, narrates the experience of a critic named Bano with hijra communities, "One hijra explains that we are like women: our mind is like women, our dress is like women, our talk is like women, but we are unable to bear children" (30). The article emphasizes that these people are not inferior but it's our society that made them inferior through their dehumanizing and insensitive behavior. Similarly, in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Roy tries to draw the attention of the readers towards the subjugated classes around her. Through her writings, she has questioned the place of the transgender community and other marginalized people in her society and has advocated for their equal treatment everywhere in the world.

Research Methodology

This paper presents the qualitative critical analysis of a Hijra character, Anjum, portrayed by Roy in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, and it deals with the various aspects that contribute to humiliating the transgender community. A close analysis of the text will elaborate that how Anjum has subverted the stereotyped norms of the society and created a queer and unusual way

of living for her survival by living in the graveyard. The queer theory, elaborated and explained by theorists such as Judith Butler and Foucault, has been used throughout the text to examine it carefully. Queer Jen Jack Gieseeking defined Queer theory as,

Queer theory is committed to critiquing and problematizing previous ways of theorizing identity.. it is a discourse model that destabilizes the assumptions and privileges of secure heteronormative models of study and everyday life and politicizes and acknowledges the fluidity and instability of identities. (53-54)

This theory fulfills all the criteria that justify the queer behavior of the characters of the novel through which the paper will analyze Anjum's way of living and how she challenges the stereotypes of society and forms an anti-normative way of living.

Discussion

Analyzing the character of Anjum in-depth, we see how she has revolted against the social norms to create a ministry of happiness for herself as well as for the other suppressed people. She builds Jannat Guest House in a graveyard for this purpose. Jannat Guest House does not accommodate only the living, but it also accommodates the dead. As we know Anjum herself is a disenfranchised member of the society who is never accepted by the society, yet she shelters other subjugated people of the society. For this reason, she always has a soft corner for the outcastes. (Tickell 8). In the very beginning, the reader sees how the revelation of Anjum's identity has affected her life. She is socially attacked by the people in our surroundings as well as her own family. Transgenders suffer constant ridicule and harassment in public spheres, and they are also subjected to physical violence that does not evoke any response from the state institutions. Sometimes, such an attitude is justified by accusing the transgender of being evil and immoral. "Hijras are rejected and even abused by members, usually men, of their natal families, which forces many to leave their blood relations and seek shelter with other Hijras" (Jaffer 178).

Although Anjum was born as a boy, later on, her tendencies identified a feminine quest in her personality. As Jain (who works for gender equality and LGBT issues) explains the term hijra, "Hijra community is a subset of transgender. Transgender are those who do not associate themselves with the sex assigned at the time of birth" (n. p.). One day, standing on the balcony when she was a little Aftab, her eyes got stuck on Bombay Silk and that was a moment of realization for Anjum how much she wanted to wear those glittery clothes and just to be like her, but soon after some time, she realized that the world outside was a mere illusion. Being transgender is not something that gives liberty to be oneself, though one is spared sometimes in some circumstances (like Anjum was spared by the Hindus in the Gujrat riots because she was a transgender; neither male nor female) because one does not even exist for other people. As a result, one becomes invisible and unwanted; society shuts its eyes once and for all.

Having a specific identity allotted by the society, individuals are documented as male or female members of the society and then he/she act according to their ascribed roles but what about the others? What place does society hold for the third gender? As, in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, when Anjum was born, her identity was categorized into the third gender box, which made everything worse for her. The very first stroke Anjum received was from her mother. Although mothers are considered to be the fountain of love and affection in the case of Anjum, it turns out to be a completely different scenario. Her mother, Jahanara Begum, loses love for her child, and she visits a shrine and requests the Sufi to make her strong enough to love her child. "This is my son, Aftab, she whispered to Hazrat Sarmad. I've brought him here to you. Look after him. And teach me how to love him" (Roy 11). Her mother is not scared of Anjum's

biological characteristics, but it's the social attitude that makes her nervous. She still wants to go against the social norms and love her child, but the social pressure is so strong that she is unable to face it. Amen Jaffer says, "The dominant understanding of Hijras as abnormal freaks of nature essentially erases them from society by questioning their very existence as a distinct gender" (Jaffer 177). Such a social attitude not only makes Hijra's life difficult but creates problems for their parents as well. The same is the case of Jahanara Begum she does not know in which category to put Aftab. Begum knows that everything has gender whether it is a living or non-living thing.

Everything was either masculine or feminine, man or woman. Everything except her baby. 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 the language? (Roy 8)

Language is a social phenomenon, and there is a culture associated with language. When Jahanara says that there is no way to live outside of language, the purpose is to seek any way to challenge socially constructed standards.

Anjum's life is a complete account of the transgender community, and Roy has divided it into two major parts: One part gives details about Anjum's efforts to fulfill her desires and to meet her intention by living within the boundaries drawn by society. On the other hand, she struggles to live a life outside the norms and standards of society when she moves to live in a cemetery; a place which is socially built for the dead. Earlier, Anjum moves to Khwabgah to fulfill her desires and to live her life. Khwabgah is a place where transgenders live according to their laws.

The Khwabgah was called Khwabgah, Ustaad Kulsoom Bi said, because it was a place where special people, *blessed* people, came with their dreams that could not be realized in the Duniya. In the Khwabgah, Holy souls trapped in the wrong bodies were liberated. (Roy 53)

People never consider Hijras an equal part of society and they never ask them for any betterment of the society because the people of this South Asia assume that they are not even eligible to contribute to the development of the country. Similarly, Roy mentions Anjum's desire to help the poor which seemed insane to other people because no one thinks that transgenders would also have some sort of skills or talent and they can also be valuable as citizens.

Although nobody wants to get help from them considering them untouchables, it is seen that outcastes of the society still seek help from a transgender, Anjum. When she establishes Jannat Guest House, people come for living as well as for burial. Transgender had always paid their contribution to society, and this can be seen in the Mughal era. The most compelling evidence can be traced in the text when Kulsoom Bi tells about transgender tradition and their services to emperors. Somehow, Roy has diverted our attention to the fact that Hijras had not been in such a bad condition in the past as they are in the contemporary period. Ustad Kalsoom Bi recalls their status and glory during the Mughal era, and how Mughal emperors positioned them in a respectable place. "Always remember – we are not just any Hijras from any place. We are the Hijras of Shahjahanabad. Our Rulers trusted us enough to put their wives and mothers in our care" (Roy 48-49).

Furthermore, we can find this instance in history when M. Michael talks about the Mughal attitude towards the transgender community. He says they (transgender) were given rights as well as higher positions such as political advisor. They built separate residencies for

transgender. They had paid for their services as political advisors and administrators of the empire which is evidence of their capabilities (17). The position of transgender fluctuated from time to time. During Mughal rule, transgender lived a respectable life, but in modern times they are deprived of their rights. Even though they cherish their past position, they stay connected to the heritage which they possessed. Kulsoom Bi tries to console in these words, “Did you hear that? That is us. That is our ancestry, our history, our story. We were never commoners, you see, we were the members of the staff of the Royal place” (Roy 18). This is just one chuckle that makes them proud; otherwise, they do not have any identity or source to make them worthy to get appreciation.

Equally important is the other aspect that Roy has highlighted: The political marginalization of the transgender community. The rights of Hijras are not defined properly, and they do not have a suitable political body that can represent them in the public sector. Eventually, they face a lack of communication with higher authorities or the higher authorities keep them away. Under such sympathetic conditions, they live and struggle to meet both ends. They are severely criticized and mocked whenever they leave their ‘ghetto’. Surprisingly, we ignore such conditions for transgender. If we look at our society, we can easily see that transgender are not living like normal people. They are ghettoized, and they always live under certain limitations imposed by society.

A little part of society proposes that transgenders are living and roaming free in the streets. Let me explain their condition of freedom and for this purpose, I want to tell a situation: They are living free like a person who is imprisoned in a room and is asked to do whatever he wants to do in the room, but the freedom is limited only to that specific room. Such pathetic is the condition of Hijras in Pakistan and India as well as other South Asian states. Roy has focused on the character of Anjum to elaborate on the political, social, and economic situation of the society. Even though Anjum is a grown adult and can roam as prescribed in the constitution of India freely, she faces problems in acknowledging her freedom. She travels with Maulana to protect herself, otherwise, people tease her and harm her on the way. Though Anjum chooses the graveyard on her own, nobody notices the miserable state which forces her to live in a graveyard. Thus, society places them in the same place as it places dead ones.

Apart from this, nobody recognizes their struggle for rights. Dr. Azad Bhartiya fasts for the rights and betterment of people, and he mentions all the issues of society but forgets the rights of the Hijra community.

I am fasting against the following issues: I am against the Capitalist Empire, US Capitalism, Indian and American state Terrorism/ All Kinds of Nuclear Weapons and Crime, the Bad Education System/ Corruption/ Violence Environmental Degradation, and All Other Evils. Also, I am against Unemployment. I am also fasting against the complete obliteration of the entire Bourgeois class. (Roy 126)

Meanwhile, Dr. Azad Bhartiya forgets to mention the rights of the transgender community like society has already ignored them as a whole. As Nalini Iyer has quoted in her article, the words of Arundhati Roy give a vivid depiction of the political situation. She says, “When people say this business of ‘she’ the voice of the voiceless’, it makes me crazy,’ ... ‘I say, ‘there’s no voiceless, there’s only the deliberately silenced, you know, or the purposely unheard” (Iyer 166-167). For the matter of being ignored, Dr. Bhartiya uses a trick for not getting ignored. He says, “The Doctor part of my name is pending, like my PhD. I’m using that title a little bit in advance only to make people listen to me and believe what I say” (Roy 128).

Such attitude marginalizes Hijras, and they are forced to stand at traffic signals to beg. It has been noted that the state works for the orphans and builds orphanages for them, but again state fails to recognize the poor conditions of the transgender community. Sometimes, when Hijras themselves take part in helping society, they are humiliated. Anjum, Saddam Hussain, and Ustad Hameed visited Jantar Mantar where people protested for their rights. Anjum just wants to visit and see what sort of demands are being raised. There, she gets another blow for her gender. Mr. Aggarwal asks, “Who gave these Hijras permission to sit here? Which of these Struggles do they belong to?” (Roy 119). Hence, Hijras have no right to protest as well and they cannot take part in any sort of struggle as a nation such as Bhopalis and Waster recyclers do. Filippo Menozzi says, “War and unhappiness inhabiting their subjectivities cannot be solved by pitting the inside of the character against the outside” (6).

Although, Anjum had been through a lot; abandoned, targeted, abused, and tortured by grief and pain inflicted upon her by society, she did not let her inner being become insensitive towards other people. She transformed her tragedy into an opportunity by making a place for other fallen people in the cemetery. She reconstructed her identity against the reality (bestowed to her through society) by helping the poor souls who were rejected by this *Duniya*. Janat Guest House became a real paradise on earth for the fallen people of the society. “Gradually Jannat Guest House became a hub for Hijras who for one reason or another, had fallen out of, or been expelled from, the tightly administered grid of Hijra Gharanas” (69). She knew that this place was for the fallen people and wished for a place where people could no longer humiliate them for their physical characteristics. In her novel, Roy has portrayed a place in the graveyard that becomes a shelter for the out-casted and marginalized. This is a place where they can be happy and enjoy their life like every other individual in Indian society. “So all in all, with a people's pool, a people's Zoo, and a people's school, things were going well in the old graveyard. The same could not be said of the Duniya” (Roy 400).

Roy has highlighted the various aspects affecting the lives of the transgender community and other minorities. Culture is portrayed as an important factor in developing the identity of an individual in South-Asian societies. There are fixed notions and stereotypes attached to each gender and individuals spend the rest of their lives conforming to those roles assigned to them. Roy has demonstrated the hypocrisies that exist in her society through the characters of her book Sadaam represents how people are discriminated against based on their caste while Musa presents the struggle of the Kashmiri people for independence.

What caste Am I? What is your question? With such a huge political agenda as mine, you tell me, what cast should I be? What caste were Jesus Gautam and Budth? What caste was Marx? What cast was Prophet Muhammad? Only Hindus have this caste, this inequality is contained in their scriptures. (Roy 129)

The paper shows how Anjum, the subjugated member of society goes beyond her limits to console other people. She struggles not only for her existence but also for others because she does not want them to suffer or go through what she has suffered.

Conclusion

Overall, the novel challenges traditional norms and binaries and reconsiders stereotypes associated with gender and sexual orientation. Through the representation of the hijra community and characters like Anjum, a transgender woman, Roy explores the fluidity and complexity of gender identities. Queer theory helps in deconstructing the social constructs and intersectionality

of identity markers present in the novel. It has allowed readers to think beyond the margins and accept the existence of the intersex community because the third gender is a reality that needs to be acknowledged and that should be given a right to not only survive but to live and participate in all social domains.

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