

Gendered Exile and Spatial Belonging in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

M. Ummer Ali¹ Dr. P. Ananthan²

1. Ph. D. English scholar, Marudupandiyar College, Thanjavur. (Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli)

2. Research Advisor and Assistant Professor, Department of English, Marudupandiyar College Thanjavur. (Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli)

Abstract

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Arundhati Roy undertakes a deep literary exploration of transgender identity, urban marginality, and the search for belonging in India today. Through the life of Anjum, born Aftab in Shahjahanabad, Roy presents gender as an embodied and social reality that enters family life, religious discourse, public space and political history. Anjum's movement from domestic uncertainty to the Khwabgah and then from the Khwabgah to Jannat Guest House gives the novel a strong spatial structure. Each space has a different relation to identity and community." The Khwabgah provides hijras with ritual recognition, lineage and protection. Jannat Guest House, founded in a graveyard, takes the idea of intimate sanctuary and extends it into a broader social ethic of hospitality for the dispossessed. Delhi, on the other hand, is a city of spectacle, of exclusion, of unequal citizenship. This paper argues that Roy depicts exile as injury and social knowledge. In Roy, through Anjum, there is a literary vision where marginal life generates alternative modes of kinship, dignity and collective care. The novel also gains power from an intersectional framework, as Anjum's identity as hijra, Muslim, and subject of class vulnerability shows how multiple structures of exclusion work together. Roy's story eventually turns the graveyard into a vital social space and dispossession into a discourse of moral community. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* thus provides a powerful re-imagining of gendered belonging in the contemporary fiction of India.

Keywords: transgender identity, hijra community, spatial belonging, urban marginality, intersectionality, Arundhati Roy.

Introduction.

Arundhati Roy, in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, brings the lives of those who live on the margins of official visibility and social legitimacy into the center. In Anjum's story, among the many threads, there is a particular force as it brings together questions of gender, religion, class, kinship and space in a single literary arc. Anjum's journey begins in secrecy and confusion, and develops into a collective, political, and layered experience. With this character, Roy creates a narrative space in which transgender identity is characterized with emotional depth, social complexity and ethical centrality. This novel invites you to think about identity in terms of place. Roy does much more than tell the story of a hijra protagonist. She choreographs Anjum's life through a series of spaces, each with its own codes of visibility, acceptance and dignity. Shahjahanabad's family home is a world ordered by inherited language, social expectation and intimate anxiety. The Khwabgah provides a social order in which Anjum is given recognition, ritual initiation and a social lineage. Jannat Guest House opens this intimate world to an open sanctuary for multiple forms of abandon. Delhi surrounds these spaces as a wider city of division, wealth, media spectacle, communal tension and civic unevenness.

In this paper I examine Roy's depiction of transgender identity through the interrelated notions of exile and belonging. Exile in this sense means displacement from the normative spaces of family, religion, labor, and citizenship. The term for these forms of kinship, dignity and social relation that emerge through alternative worlds of care is belonging. But Roy sees both problems as equally serious. Her story gives proper weight to injury, ridicule, economic vulnerability and spiritual uncertainty. It also privileges ritual, friendship, caring, collective shelter, and moral imagination equally, at the same time. The emotional core of this argument is Anjum's journey from Aftab to Anjum. Roy presents early Aftab's body as a site of disturbance in a language-world where every object has a gender. Jahanara Begum's grief over her child's indeterminate body shows that the first way gender

comes into the novel is through a crisis of naming and understanding. That early crisis isn't limited to the family. It affects language, faith, public behavior, and the social order itself. Roy situates transgender identity in a wide web of relations, not a narrow private narrative. In this process the Khwabgah is essential. Roy calls it a "House of Dreams" where those with unfulfilled desires and identities in the larger world find cultural validation and communal refuge (Roy, 2017, p. 20). It is a world of rituals and mentorship, of discipline and affection, of hierarchy and memory. Anjum becomes a disciple, member and inheritor of a long social tradition, entering the hijra gharana under the tutelage of Ustad Kulsoom Bi. The movement gives the character a new name, a new social grammar, and a new place in the world. But Roy will not let the story be limited to closed sanctuary. Anjum's subsequent departure from the Khwabgah and her founding of the Jannat Guest House in a graveyard move the novel from community to coalition. The graveyard, usually a place of closure and exclusion, becomes a space of refuge, burial, care and plural social life. In Jannat Roy conjures a world in which the outcast create their own civic and ethical order. This paper contends that Jannat is Roy's most radical spatial imagination: a refuge for those whom the city, the state and normal society cannot hold with dignity. An intersectional approach may help to elucidate the depth of this vision. Gender cannot explain Anjum's life. Her hijra identity intersects with class vulnerability and Muslim identity. Roy also situates this life in a Delhi that heightens exclusion through uneven development, communal fear and spectacle-driven urban culture. Intersectionality, a term coined by Crenshaw (1989), describes how one body can be affected by multiple intersecting power structures. Anjum's story is not one story. It provides a literary account of how one body lives in response to exclusion through care, endurance, and world-making.

This paper explores Roy's re-casting of Anjum from a figure of gendered exile to a creator of alternative belonging. The conversation takes place in four movements: Anjum's emergence into transgender selfhood; the Khwabgah as ritual sanctuary and communal archive; Jannat Guest House as an inclusive counter-space; and Delhi as a city that sharpens intersectional marginality while also making resistance necessary.

Anjum and the Construction of Transgender Selfhood

Roy introduces Anjum through the birth of Aftab in old Delhi. This opening is important as it places social understanding at the problem of bodily ambiguity. Jahanara Begum's private shock is that she can't fit the child into an already gendered language. Roy's famous line about Urdu, where everything is gendered "except her baby", gives the scene symbolic density (Roy, 2017, p. 12). Here gender is a linguistic order that organizes the world. Aftab's body disrupts that order and reveals its limits.

The child's early years are played out against concealment, tenderness, and growing dissonance. Aftab's musical talent, emotional sensitivity and feminine self-expression give her an inward route to self-recognition. Roy eschews sensational treatment. She gives dignity to uncertainty and gravity to the slow coming of self-knowledge. The public face of social enforcement is the mocking of other children. The "He's a She" chant exemplifies the use of ridicule as a disciplinary device in social construction of gender (Roy, 2017, p. 15). Roy puts childhood at the center of gender violence and at the center of gender truth. Aftab meets the Khwabgah and the condition is altered. Roy talks of that initial movement into the house as entering "another universe" (Roy, 2017, p. 24). The phrase fits the moment well because Aftab enters a space where selfhood becomes legible. The Khwabgah provides social air, space and recognition. Roy's description of the place as one where "the air made way for him" (Roy, 2017, p. 20) is one of the most luminous statements about gendered belonging in the novel. So belonging starts as a relief from social compression. Ritual is the formal transition from Aftab to Anjum. For Roy, the green dupatta, the initiation ceremony and the entry into the Delhi gharana under Ustad Kulsoom Bi are significant (Roy, 2017, p. 24). These details matter because they inscribe transgender identity in a social history inherited. The transition immediately acquires a bodily, social and spiritual force. Anjum gets a name, a mentor and a community legacy. Roy rejects the notion that hijra identity is isolation or accident. She sees it in tradition, in discipline, in collective memory. Kulsoom Bi's teaching amplifies this process. Her assurance that hijras are chosen and beloved and her description of hijra as "a Body in which a Holy Soul lives," offer an alternative theology of personhood (Roy, 2017, p. 25). This language invests a life that the mainstream scorns or suspects with sacred dignity. Part of the force of Roy's narrative is located here: she offers counter-language to the languages of stigma. Anjum inherits a moral vocabulary that affirms rather than shames embodiment via Kulsoom Bi. And with it Roy has an eye for social cruelty. Through the metaphor of the tree, which turns suffering into a

figure of stillness, rootedness and interior music, Anjum endures insult and “casual cruelty” (Roy, 2017, p. 9). This passage is far more than a victim narrative. It shows a self that makes hurt into stamina and quiet beauty. Roy gives Anjum strength without removing the pain. This balance provides the character with literary weight and ethical depth. Religion and class make up this portrait. Anjum’s discussion with the Imam concerning burial rituals suggests that exclusion infiltrates sacred institutions and ritual afterlife (Roy, 2017, p. 10). Her Muslimness adds to precarity in the context of a broader culture of communal tension. She has another dimension in her father who is a hakim and a lover of Urdu poetry. It is sophistication and cultural capital alongside economic dependence. Instead of using single labels, Roy constructs Anjum’s identity through intersections. Gender selfhood comes with body, family, faith and class all at once.

The Khwabgah as a Sanctuary, Ritual World and Communal Archive

The Khwabgah is among Roy’s most significant social spaces. It saves them from mockery and ostracism, but it also gives them hijra life form, discipline and continuity. Roy describes it as a sanctuary for ‘special people’ who have not yet realized their dreams in the duniya (Roy, 2017, p. 20). The definition reveals the space as a reaction to a society that offers no space and no value to nonconforming life. The Khwabgah is a household in the fullest sense of the word. Its kinship is not of blood but of shared vulnerability, mutual dependence and chosen attachment. Residents receive emotional support, social instruction, ritual incorporation and everyday fellowship. Kulsoom Bi occupies an important position in this order as guru, elder and moral authority. She carries memory and law in the Khwabgah. It is a lived archive of hijra tradition. Here Roy’s treatment of gharana is particularly relevant. Anjum’s entry into one of the seven regional hijra gharanas connects personal transformation to a longstanding structure of cultural inheritance (Roy, 2017, p. 24). This detail prevents the community from being sociologically flattened. The novel shows Hijra life as a world with history, genealogy, custom and forms of instruction. Roy’s story gives continuity to a community that is frequently deprived of complexity in public discourse. The Khwabgah ceremonies are concerned with identity through affirmation. Clothing, naming, initiation, performance and shared custom give social texture to selfhood. “Identity requires more than mere inward truth,” Roy says. It also requires social practices that are repeated and communal. This is exactly what Khwabgah provides. It provides Anjum with a space where selfhood comes into everyday life through gesture, relation and ceremony. But the Khwabgah is paradoxical. It is safe but it is semi-hidden, right on the edge of the city. Enclosure and protection are coextensive. Inside its walls, its residents are free to live openly, but outside them, public vulnerability begins again. Roy foregrounds this tension. Sanctuary is needed because society remains cruel. But enclosure constrains the field of belonging. The Khwabgah is both achievement and symptom. It is an achievement of communal care, and a symptom of civic exclusion.

Roy also links the Khwabgah with resistance. Its very existence challenges the binary social order of the wider world. It preserves gender diversity, communal memory and dignity in a culture that wants to simplify and control. The resistance in public performances, advocacy and visibility of the residents is extended beyond the house. Roy’s Khwabgah is more than a shelter. It is also a cultural and ethical counterpublic.

Jannat Guest House as a Caring Counter-Space of Inclusion

It is at this point, when Anjum leaves the Khwabgah, that the novel takes a turn. After spending years in that closed world, she moves to a neglected graveyard and slowly builds Jannat Guest House. This change is of major conceptual implications. The Khwabgah is the home of a particular community; Jannat is available to a wider collectivity of the forsaken. Roy takes the idea of belonging further.

Kulsoom Bi’s discourse on manzoori or consent is a major backdrop to this movement (Roy, 2017, p. 43). Anjum’s later social vision is rooted in the moral seriousness of the Khwabgah. But Jannat takes that vision in a different direction. The guesthouse takes in hijras, orphans, drifters, dissidents, homeless people and religious outcasts. Roy creates a plural world for Jannat, a world that stems out of shared exclusion, not just shared identity. The graveyard setting further supports this notion. A place usually associated with death becomes one of cooking, conversation, burial, shelter, and collective life. Anjum’s going into the graveyard is another movement into a different world, as described by Roy (Roy, 2017, p. 46). She creates a counter-city of the graveyard, a city of tenderness, not hierarchy. This transformation provides the novel with one of its most powerful images: life thriving on land marked for neglect. Jannat becomes a spatial critique of social order outside. The very name is

loaded with symbolic power. “Jannat,” or paradise, embodies Anjum’s goal to make refuge real for those left by society (Roy, 2017, p. 53). Here paradise is not transcendence removed from history. It refers to an ethic of hospitality on this earth. Roy finds this ethic in common acts of provision and regard. Food, burial, shelter, conversation, guardianship are the basic practices of this alternative world. Jannat also holds a strong pluralist religious ethic. Anjum buries Hindus and Muslims alike and offers dignity across faith lines (Roy, 2017, p. 61). In a climate of communal fracture, this matters a great deal. Roy considers compassion a more potent basis for relation than orthodoxy. This vision offers Jannat a spiritual range beyond sectarian order. The space is a moral challenge to any system that ranks human worth by identity category.

Socially, Jannat is a movement from identity-based refuge to community based on coalition. The Khwabgah is a home for hijras, Jannat a civic refuge for the dispossessed. “This difference puts Anjum into a new role” She is not only a recipient of care, but also a provider of it. Roy is Anjum founder, host and guardian. Exile becomes social leadership, gendered. The last pages of the novel crystallize this transformation. Anjum’s redistribution of flowers across graves, her contented glance back at Jannat, her midnight walk with Miss Udaya Jebeen all spell out a life rooted in care, continuity and future (Roy, 2017, pp. 437–438). At this point Jannat seems more than a place. It becomes an ethical world where memory, burial, nurture and hope all live together.

Delhi, Intersectionalities and Urban Marginalities

Anjum’s story is set on the widest social canvas in Delhi. Roy presents the city as a place of contradictions, where wealth and dispossession, modern spectacle and civic abandonment, monumental history and everyday exclusion coexist. This urban context is important as it sets the scene in which spaces like the Khwabgah and Jannat are needed.

One stark example is Roy’s account of the city’s media culture. Young reporters swarm through Delhi asking the poor, the hungry, the homeless “urgent, empty questions” (Roy, 2017, p. 73). Poverty is made into a spectacle by public discourse. The city devours suffering as image, at the same time protecting its structures of production. Scenes like this teach us that visibility and justice are not the same thing. Public notification can be a companion to material abandonment for marginalized subjects. The more detailed urban account of roads, slick cars, displaced vendors, toxic resettlement colonies and ‘surplus’ children paints an even more brutal picture (Roy, 2017, pp. 74–75). Roy constructs Delhi as a moral geography of unequal citizenship. Luxury and poison were in the same town. Elite calm is built on mass dispossession. This background makes Anjum’s life in the graveyard perfectly legible. The city provides a selective comfort and legitimation. Those outside its preferred image must improvise life in the cracks and leftovers. Communal politics gives another dimension. The novel depicts Delhi as a city of religious tension and minority vulnerability. Anjum, Muslim identity and hijra identity, intersect in an atmosphere of suspicion and civic fragility. Such a life can be explained by no one framework of gender analysis. Roy’s fiction demands an intersectional reading in the strongest sense. Crenshaw’s (1989) concept of intersectionality is useful here because Anjum’s experience is the result of the intersection of multiple structures of exclusion. She is a hijra in a gender-policed society, a Muslim in a majoritarian climate and a subject of economic precarity in a sharply unequal city. Each axis enriches the other. Roy doesn’t just theorize this intersection, but shows it through event, image and space. The novel is also irreducible because Anjum exceeds any one analytic category. Daughter, disciple, public figure, mourner, caregiver, founder and guardian. Roy permits her social and affective range. That range allows the novel to move beyond a case study of marginalization to a deeper reflection on collective life.

Anjum doesn’t just survive the city. She recycles its abandoned spaces into new social meaning. Delhi and Jannat are thus put in productive tension. Exclusion is organized by the city. Care is responded by Jannat. The city falls apart; Jannat gathers. The city commercializes pain; Jannat dignifies vulnerability. This contrast is fundamental to Roy’s social vision. Urban marginality produces pain, but that margin is a place for ethical innovation.

Conclusion

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness provides one of the most powerful literary studies of transgender life in contemporary Indian fiction. Through Anjum, Roy foregrounds gender identity in a wide-ranging discussion of language, kinship, religion, class, and urban citizenship. What makes the novel strong is its capacity to move from intimate injury to social imagination with no loss of complexity. Anjum’s life begins in the ambiguity of her body and the uncertainty of her family, before being acknowledged within the Khwabgah, where ritual, kinship and

collective memory shape transgender selfhood. Roy treats that house as a sanctuary and a cultural archive, a world in which hijra identity attains dignity, continuity and moral language. But the novel moves beyond the sanctuary of enclosure. Jannat Guest House extends the ethic of care to a wider community of the abandoned and turns a graveyard into an inclusive social space. The pressures of inequality, spectacle, communal fear and civic exclusion surround these personal worlds in Delhi. The novel's political urgency comes from the city of Roy. Anjum's life is a window into the ways gender variance, Muslim identity and class vulnerability converge in that urban order. It is through such intersections that Roy gives us a nuanced account of marginality that demands sustained critical engagement. The novel's deepest achievement is its revaluation of exile. Exile, for Roy, is a wound but also a source of social knowledge and communal invention. Anjum, who was earlier depicted as excessive to normative life, becomes a creator of a sustaining world for others. She builds relationships in which the city provides abandonment. She makes dignity where public life gives ridicule. She makes continuity where social history only gives erasure. Finally, Roy gives a radical meaning to belonging. In this novel belonging is not about entering dominant institutions. It is highlighted in sheltering, burying, recognizing, redistributing, and caring. The Khwabgah and Jannat Guest House are two manifestations of this alternative order. Through them, through Anjum's journey through them, the novel imagines a social future in which marginalized lives are at the center of ethical vision.

References.

- [1] Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), 139–167.
- [2] Roy, A. (2017). *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Hamish Hamilton.