



Transgender Marginalization and Exclusion in Arundathi Roy's *The Ministry of the Utmost Happiness*

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Abstract

This paper attempts to analyze trans-gender discrimination and identity crisis as reflected in the the protagonist, Anjum of Arundathi Roy's 2017 novel *The Ministry of the Utmost Happiness*. Gender identity is the identity of a person caused by the degree of feminine or masculine traits in a person conforming to the stereotypical definition of a male or female expounded by the society. The gender identity of a person is a psychological aspect of a person reflecting his/her sexual orientations. The fiction, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* follows Anjum, a trans-woman, struggling to make a life for herself in Delhi. It possesses the strong voice of the LGBT community in Modern India. Having different historical contexts, this novel is a reflection to various types of discriminations prevalent in the Indian society such as transgender discrimination that is based on gender identity, women discrimination that is based on male domination, Dalit discrimination based on caste system, Muslim minority discrimination based on religious prejudice and national identity crisis based on multi-ethnic alienation that leads to the issue of identity crisis in the dislocated and disoriented people. The victims of discrimination suffer from personality disorder and feel alienated because they are incapable of synchronizing with the biased society and represent the theme of identity crisis. The description about the application of queer theory in the study of personality to the character of Anjum in Pursuit of the true self is articulated. The construction and use of the hijra figure in

fictional literature are utilized both as symbols of deviance and central points around which wider anti-sociality circulates. Hijras continue to fight for their rights whilst attempting to survive in an increasingly marginal social position.

Keywords: trans-gender discrimination; sexual orientations; trans-woman; LGBT; identity crisis; Hijras

The society around us constitutes of traditions and customs, a variety of cultures and a mixture of communities. To retain social order, the human beings should remain united. However the society creates borders among the people themselves based on factors like caste, religion language, gender etc. Among the many marginalized groups, the 'transgender community' or the 'third gender' is left forgotten and wiped off completely from the existing social order. The position of these people is always a topic of conflict as they don't adhere to the societal norms and conditions. The role of biological sex at the time of birth and accepted behavioral pattern based on the specific gender is one major factor that determines the position of a human being in the accepted social framework. However the inconsistency in terms of performance of these individuals in relation to their biological gender and gender expressions make them alienated from the society. Hence they are always degenerated throughout their lives. They are abandoned and remain invisible in society as they fail to fall under the accepted social structure which creates grave wounds, especially in terms of their identity.

The term, "transgender" includes all those people whose internally felt sense of core gender identity does not correspond to their assigned sex at birth or in which they were raised. Transgender is in its origin a disjunction between one's feelings of who one is or is not, and how one is or has once been perceived, recognized and understood by others. The experience of being transgender problematizes the relationship of the self to the body, and the self to the others. In doing so, it also problematizes issues of identity boundaries, stability and coherence.

Transgender people are individuals whose identities do not pertain to their biological sex, and hence they differ from the stereotype of how men and women normally are. Their identity and behavior do not adhere to the stereotyped gender norms. They constitute the marginalized section of the society in India, and thus face legal, social as well as economic difficulties. They have restricted access to education, health service and public spaces. The novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* takes us on an intimate journey of many years across the Indian landscape and deals with various such characters and explores their plight in the course of their collision with the outside world. The story

moves from the cramped neighborhoods of Old Delhi and the roads of the new city to the mountains and valleys of Kashmir and beyond. The novel, told in whisper with elaborate use of similes and occasional use of allusions from religious scripture. The heroes and heroines of the novel are not like the epic heroes, but mostly an ordinary people excluded and broken by the world they live in. They undergo a series of vicissitudes and finally rescued and patched together by acts of love.

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness, written by Booker prize winner Arundhati Roy and first published in 2017, does deeply consider the future possibilities for hijra. Whilst demonstrating concerns about the impact of other forms of non-binary gender expression on the unique identity of hijras, leading to the possibility of hijras being replaced by Trans identities without the concurrent third-gender and community-based attachments, the novel is deeply sympathetic to the fact that this shift is part of a wider negotiation of social space, rather than a comment on the redundancy of the category. The novel's main hijra character, Anjum, must work within an overtly violent and identity-stifling environment underpinned by right-wing Hindutva ideologies; ultimately, she as an individual is successful in rejecting her reduction to a symbol of Hinduism and in starting her own community of marginalised people, but a question mark nonetheless hangs over the broader category of 'hijra' as a socially-condoned grouping. This hulking and sprawling tale has two main stands: one follows Anjum, a hijra, unrolling threadbare Persian carpet in a city graveyard she calls home. She and her company harbor a hope that has no entity but only to revivify the breath lost by years ago. Anjum, who has a complex gender history, was born intersex, with both male and female genitals, and in her prime lived with a community of transgender women.

The book actually begins from its very cover page with the picture of a marble grave and the setting. The book's dedication- "to, the unconsolated," sets its subject matter- to sooth those whose narratives have only been 'buried under years of silence' and ignored by the 'pages of the hegemony's history', a history entrusted upon the marginal. To re-write this history through the voices of victims, she has proved herself to be an extraordinary historiographer and an intelligent story teller.

The first chapter, "Where Do Old Birds Go to Die?" Anjum is introduced in the first few lines of the novel as she "lived in a graveyard like a tree" (Roy, 2017: p. 1) Anjum has been compared with the tree. The tree could mean a natural growth. It could also signify her will to live against all the forces, shuttling her between the poles. She defies

the vultures that loomed in the high branches of the tree. The vulture being eliminated through poison acts as a metaphor, the way Indian society is poisoned by history of corrupt and venal politicians, religious hatreds, and the overflowing rivers of blood, death and denied justice. When we move forward we find that she is called by different names Magnu, Romeo, Anjum, a history is imposed on her, through different names, but she is least bothered about it: “It doesn’t matter. I’m all of them, I’m Romi and Juli, I’m Laila and Majnu. And Mujna, why not? Who says my name is Anjum, I’m Anjuman. I’m a mehfil, I’m a gathering. Of everybody and nobody, of everything and nothing.”(Roy, 4). As the novel progresses more and more, one notices that Anjum really becomes a mehfil for all. Her Jannat Guest House acted as an abode for multi faith and multi-caste people. In second chapter, we find Anjum in Khwabgah, the resort exclusively belonging to the transgender as their safe-zone. Throughout the first four chapters, the readers are introduced to one of the subject-matters of the novel - the domain of the hijra- the transgender or third gender people.

The book begins in what appears to be the nineteen-fifties when Jahanara Begum, a Delhi housewife who has waited for six years, through three daughters, to get a boy baby, goes into labor, and soon the midwife tells her that her wish has come true. She has a son. That night is the happiest of her life. In the morning, she unswaddles the baby and explores “his tiny body—eyes, nose, head, neck, armpits, fingers, toes—with sated, unhurried delight. That was when she discovered, nestling underneath his boy-parts, a small, unformed girl-part.” Her heart constricts. She shifts down her leg. Her child is a hermaphrodite.

Jahanara thinks that maybe the girl-part will close up, disappear. But month after month, year after year, it remains stubbornly there, and as the boy, Aftab, grows he becomes unmistakably girly. He could sing Chaiti and Thumri with the accomplishment and poise of a Lucknow courtesan. To cure her child suffering from the incurable malady, she took her from Dargah to Dargah and hospital to hospital. His father discourages the singing. He stays up late telling the child stories of heroic deeds done by men, but, when Aftab hears how Genghis Khan fought a whole army single-handedly to retrieve his beautiful bride from the ruffians who have kidnapped her, all he wants is to be the bride. The ‘male masculinity’ was the only kind of therapy which could cure the family of the ignominy. So, in this way, Aftab in his very young age, with an exceptional talent and love for singing, had to become a hydra headed creature, and to adopt a plethora of guises in order to survive in a world which offers no place to his mixed identity. With the passage

of time, when Jahanara Begum, his/her mother, knew the fact, all the happiness of the family changed into gloom. Sad, alone—he can't go to school; the other children tease him—he stands on the balcony of his family's house and watches the streets below, until one day he spies a fascinating creature, a tall, slim-hipped woman, wearing bright lipstick, gold sandals, and a shiny green shalwar kameez. He keeps a gaze on the woman and is pleased with her appearance. Aftab decided to follow that woman who could dress and walk as she did. "He rushed down the steep stairs into the street and followed her discreetly while she bought goats' trotters, hairclips, guavas, and had the strap of her sandals fixed. He wanted to be her." (18) . This desire kept Aftab searching for the place where he could be accommodated and finally he manages to insinuate into the 'Khwabgah', the house of dreams. That day, and for many days, he follows her home, to a house with a blue doorway. This was the only place in his world where he felt the air made way for him. (Roy, 19). The next night Aftab was presented with a green Khwabgah dupatta and initiated into the rules and rituals that formally made him a member of Hijra community. (Roy, 25).

He finds out that her name is Bombay Silk, and that her house—called the House of Dreams—shelters seven others like her: Bulbul, Razia, Heera, Baby, Nimmo, Gudiya, and Mary. All of them were born male, more or less, and all of them want to be women, or feel that they already are. Some have had their genitals surgically altered; others not. They make their living mainly as prostitutes. Aftab thinks that he will die if he can't be like them. Finally, by dint of running errands for them, he gains entry into their house. The following year, when he is fifteen, they let him move in. He becomes a full member of the community, and changes his name to Anjum. His father never again speaks to him—or to her. Her mother sends her a hot meal every day, and the two occasionally meet at the local shrine:- Anjum, six feet tall, in a spangled scarf, and tiny Jahanara in a black burqa.

Aftab up to the age of nine, continued to attend music classes. He had sweet, true singing voice and could pick up a tune after hearing it just once. At first people were amused and even encouraging, but soon the snickering and teasing from other children began. "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!" (Roy, 12). When the teasing continued and became unbearable, Aftab stopped going to his music classes and refused to go school any more. These incidents which quite often happen to the transgender people stop them from the process of education and basic right to live. For Aftab, the music represents the world outside, a wonderful world, full of possibilities. His songs signify the miracles he can perform, and the teasing from the people, are the

restrictions imposed to his creativity by socio-religious dogmatism, pointing fingers at his/her gender. Aftab, now caught in the male-female conventional boundaries begins to search his real place in the society.

Here Aftab became Anjum, disciple of Ustad Kulsoom Bi, head of the household and had to live a life outside 'Duniya'. Kulsoom Bi describes the agony of Hijra's in one of her conversation with Anjum as:

Ordinary people in the Duniya-what did they know about what it takes to live a life of Hijra? What did they know about the rules, the discipline and the sacrifices? Who today knew that there had been times when all of them, including she, Ustad Kulsoom Bi herself, had been driven to begging for alms at traffic lights? That they had built themselves up, bit by bit, humiliation by humiliation, from there? The Khwabgah was called Khwabgah because it was 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)

Anjum was so desolate and distressed that she was least bothered of Jinns and ghosts in the graveyard. She looked like a lifeless body. Her emotions have been crushed to the ground. But she bravely fought against all the evil forces, within and outside to survive and prosper. Gradually, the fort of desolation scaled down into a dwelling of manageable proportions. It became home; a place of predictable, reassuring sorrow –awful, but reliable. Anjum began to groom herself again. She had her facial hairs removed, hennaed her hair into flaming orange, dressed in Pathan suits and gained weight. She built a small house with a little kitchen in the graveyard. None of the municipality officers was man enough to forcibly remove her. Like everyone else, they feared being cursed by a Hijra. Over time Anjum began to enclose the graves of her relatives and build rooms around them. She began to rent them to down-and-out travellers. Anjum called her guest house Jannat(Paradise). She celebrated Eid and Diwali with great pompous nature in her paradise with her friends. But she bravely fought against all the evil forces ,within and outside to survive and prosper:

Gradually her house became known as the Jannat Guest House, because it was the hub, for Hijras who, for one reason or another, had fallen out of, or been expelled from, the tightly administered grid of Hijra Gharanas. (Roy, 68)

The character sketch of Anjum is build through the course of sixty years. The novel with its digressions and deep political and historical accounts from partition to the present day, allegorically deals with many of the contemporary

issues. In the final chapters Jahanara Begum's son had become her daughter, and the bandicoot was now a bride. But other than that, nothing much had changed. (Roy, 415) The other female characters in the novel also suffer the most. The residents of Khwabgah, a community of either female or transgender characters become the prey of all those who wanted to feed on them.

Customarily, hijras aren't given privilege and considered as other men, criticizing their emergence, attitude etc... The other transgender characters in the book include Kulsoom Bi, Gudiya, Bulbul, (had both been through the formal extremely painful religious castration. Roy, 27), Bismillah (who moved to Khwabgah after her husband, had thrown her out of their home for not bearing him a child. Roy, 21), Razia, Nimmo Gorakhpuri and Anjum. In fact, the entire world of Hijras is intensely crammed. In the course of the novel, they try to rise and live over and over from the ashes of discrimination. Nimmo Gorakhpuri, contemplating on the God's purpose of creating Hijras as an experiment. Again, Nimmo calls Hijras as "jackals who feed off other people's happiness, we are all happiness hunters." (Roy, 24) These isolated residents of 'Khwabgah' to 'Jannat Guest House' are trapped in-between two opposite worlds. 'Khwabgah' is a place, signifying to fulfill the shattered dreams of 'Duniya.'

Roy excels in describing the unique Hijras' physical fitness, appearance, way of dressing, their walks and talks, religious activities, custom and asserts them as privileged people in the sight of Almighty. No hijra is happy but left unhappy all the time. Ustad Kulsoom Bi, Anjum's guru made her understand that "Hijras were chosen people, beloved of Almighty. The word Hijra, she said, meant a Body in which a Holy Soul lives." (27).

Like Anjum, who was born as Aftab, there are many others who struggled throughout their lives to make a living for themselves. They aren't just ignored for not belonging to any specified gender, rather, are targeted and mocked for their existence. Their own families disown them as was the case with Anjum, when her father Mulaqat Ali realised nothing can be done about her condition, he along with his wife Jahanara Begum decided to send her away to Khwabgah, a special place for people like her. These narrow mindsets of people make the life of people like Anjum even more difficult. Anjum had lived her life away from her home and created a new home for herself which had no knowledge of the outside world. Remembering her mother's last words in ICU, "I feel I am surrounded by eunuchs. Am I?" (MUH 413), Tilo was so shocked and couldn't believe the reality of those word.

In India, hijras—people who, though biologically male, feel they are female, and dress and act as women—constitute a long-recognized subculture. They have certainly been subject to persecution, but they are now edging their way toward acceptance, as a “third sex.” As for how they function poetically in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Indian storytelling, from the Mahabharata onwards, has tended to favor fantasy, transformation, high color. Hijras contribute to this tradition. People who are defending their right to be women, not men, do not, as a rule, wear pin-striped suits. They wear golden sandals and green-satin shalwars. In Roy’s “House of Dreams”, they also paint their nails and sing songs from Bollywood movies. At the same time, they are the book’s ruling metaphor for sorrow:

“Do you know why God made hijras?” Anjum’s housemate Nimmo asks her one day. “It was an experiment. He decided to create something, a living creature that is incapable of happiness. So he made us.” Think about it, she says. What are the things regular people get upset about? “Price-rise, children’s school-admissions, husbands’ beatings, wives’ cheatings, Hindu-Muslim riots, Indo-Pak war—outside things that settle down eventually. But for us the price-rise and school-admissions and beating-husbands and cheating-wives are all inside us. The riot is inside us. Indo-Pak is inside us. It will never settle down. It can’t.”(23)

Nimmo had said that for most people Hindu-Muslim riots and the Indo-Pakistani war were outside matters, things that happened in the world, whereas for hijras conflict was an internal condition, and ceaseless. Accordingly, what the hijras in this novel represent, more than anything else, is India itself. She’s a perfect emblem of India’s predicament.

Anjum will not contradict Nimmo, her elder, but in time she finds out for herself. On her eighteenth birthday, a big party is held in the House of Dreams. Hijras come from all over the city. For the first time in her life, she wore a sari but the maleness in her dominated her body and she underwent severe trauma and identity crisis during that night. She cursed herself to have born a man. Ustad Kulsoom Bi managed to calm her. One of her housemates gives her a tranquillizer and puts her to bed. For the occasion, Anjum buys a red “disco” sari with a backless top:

That night she dreamed she was a new bride on her wedding night. She awoke distressed to find that her sexual pleasure had expressed itself into her beautiful garment like a man’s. It wasn’t the first time this had happened, but for some reason, perhaps because of the sari, the humiliation she felt had never been so intense. She sat in the courtyard and howled like a wolf, hitting herself on her head and between her legs, screaming with self-inflicted pain.(27)

The pain of being a man and unable to cope with manly qualities and exhibitions, she has genital surgery, but her new vagina never works right. That night in sari is the last orgasm of her life. Sex is the least of her problems, though.

By the time Aftab turned fourteen, he started to understand his mind's urge to be a woman. He grew tall and muscular and hairy. In a panic, he tried to remove the hair on his face and body with Burnol –burn ointment that made dark patches on his skin. He plucked his eyebrows. He developed as Adams Apple. His voice broke. He was repelled by it. He grew quiet. He stopped singing. He was admitted to his home as long as his parents lived. Soon, he lost that privilege too. It was at the tender age of fifteen that Aftab stepped permanently into another universe. With the rules and rituals initiated to formally make him a member of the Hijra community, Aftab became Anjum, disciple of Ustad Kulsoom Bi. Then on, Anjum was finally able to dress in the clothes she longed to wear. She learned to communicate with the signature spread-fingered Hijra clap. The word Hijra, she said, meant a body in which the holy soul lives. Anjum had to undergo surgery to remove her male part and to enhance her existing vagina. Still, motherhood was something they longed to attain, but remained as a forever dream. Anjum picked up a girl who was left alone in the streets and treated her as her own daughter. She named her Zainab. In a few weeks, Zainab began to call Anjum as Mummy. Everyone in the haveli quenched their desire for a child through Zainab. She was bathed, dressed, her air oiled, braided, toys brought, puff-sleeved frocks and squeaking shoes. At a certain time, she decides to leave the haveli. None of the other women were willing to follow her. They were afraid to break their boundaries, forcing her to leave alone. At a ten minute temporary ride from Khwabgarh, once again Anjum entered another world. It was an unprepossessing graveyard, run-down, not very big and used only occasionally. She brought her belongings and bedded between two graves. In that setting, her desolation protected her. Many voices mimicked around her that killing Hijras brings bad luck. This was the reason why she left the safe walls of the haveli. She was humiliated beyond her worst nightmare. For months, Anjum lived in the graveyard, a ravaged, feral spectre, out-haunting every resident dijjin and spirit. She stopped grooming herself, stopped dying her hair. Facial hairs appeared. She no more took the cheap hormone injection to cover her masculinity. She decided to be herself. Her old acquaintances came in search of her. Not for physical pleasure; but for her aid. They were willing to provide her with hot meals, one of them gifted her a phone, her music teacher Ustad Hameed, who taught her at young age became a regular visitor. He would sit on some grave with Anjum's harmonium. But neither kindness nor cruelty could coax Anjum to return to her old life at the Khwabgarh. Imam Ziauddin visits daily and request Anjum to read papers to him.

The identity of Aftab as a third gender is concealed right from his birth by his own mother owing to the fear of the society. The main reason behind this is his physical body. The existence of an incomplete girl –part underneath his boy parts triggers fear in the mind of his mother who hides it from her own husband. His mother experiences trauma after observing his body as she clearly knows that every single thing (living or non-living) has a gender in Urdu, the only language she knew. However in the case of her baby it is a dilemma as there is no other word to express the gender of her baby other than ‘Hijra’. For a moment the mother faces a kind of aversion to the incomplete baby in her hands. Thus Aftab gets the name of a hijra right from his birth owing to his body. Typically, the Indian society gave “utmost” importance to the concept and ideology of gender. Even in this century, there lies strong undertones of how any person can only be classified as Male/Female and where most of the Indians do not understand what the terms “transgender”, “transsexual” etc... mean. Our society is one where even language is polarized into two. The following words are indicative of how his mother analyses the position of her baby within the norms of society:

In Urdu, the only language she knew, all things, not just living things but all things- carpets, clothes, books, pens, musical instruments- had a gender. Everything was either masculine or feminine, man or woman. Everything was either masculine or feminine, man or woman. Every thing except her baby. Yes of course she knew there was a word for those like him-Hijra. Two words actually, Hijra and Kinnar. (8)

Roy severely criticizes through her words how bodily norms constructed by the society creates rift in the life of an infant. The physical indifference of Aftab even restricted the motherly love as his mother, Jahanara Begum prays to god to teach her how to love a baby who will never be accepted in society. She always tried to keep Aftab close to her and prayed for the girl part to heal. The boundaries of society aware to his mother restricted the childhood of Aftab from school and all other pleasures of life owing to his physical incompleteness in the eyes of society. Even the voice of Aftab became a source of indifference in society. He had a sweet, true singing voice of a girl. Initially the people appreciated him for his voice but later other children in his music class started teasing and snickering him for his voice. The parents of Aftab took him to a doctor, a sexologist to determine his sex. According to the doctor, he was not a Hijra yet for practical purpose can be called one. On the other hand, he was instilled with both male and female characteristic features. The doctor called Aftab a ‘Hermaphrodite’ and suggested that the female parts be removed surgically. On the other hand, it was also made clear that even though his male parts were dominant, he might always have female tendencies throughout his life. His parents tried to forcefully implant boy tendencies by dressing him up

in male clothes and telling him the stories of warriors and heroes. All these instances from the novel are indicative of how Aftab's family is scared of the societal norms that will alienate him owing to the incompleteness in his body.

Conclusion

By concluding the story in this way, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* displays the ambitious scope of Roy's narrative. Albeit fragmented and apparently disconnected pieces until one reaches the conclusion, the story entails the possibility of a coexistence, edging towards a sense of hope that "things would turn out alright in the end" (438). Roy's tale of warning and metamorphosis thus inhabits a liminal space. And yet, though overtly political, the novel's infusion of history and myth, fact and fiction, reveals how storytelling remains a powerful weapon to convey great truths about a fragmented world. Whilst the novel delicately leaves open the question of whether the hijras will in fact disappear entirely as a result of the usurping of third-gender identity under the trans label, it certainly explores anxieties surrounding this potential outcome. Anjum is used as the voice of thirdness, testifying to the idea that this has never been about wanting to become or becoming women, and that becoming transwomen will not be the preferable or complete version that a hijra identity attempts to work towards. Throughout this dissertation, there are elements of a third-gender positioning which are unique, and that this space provides opportunities to think differently about social formation, individual difference and concepts of gender and sexuality which are not possible for identities, trans or cis, working within the binary system. The overwhelming majority of these opportunities, when taken up by writers working from within the binary system and often from the West, have been used to attach negative, extreme and/or subversive associations to the third gender. Here, Roy gives her hijra character a moment to reflect upon the positive attachments made by those inhabiting these positions. Whilst Roy does not populate this reflection with specifics, this is appropriate given her authorial position as a binary-gendered person. It has never been the remit of this thesis to consider the lived experience of hijras, but suffice it to say for the purposes of the argument being made that moments such as these underline the orientalisising, sensationalising constructedness of the way that thirdness is conceptualised by the writers considered, as against potentially more nuanced and positive readings of their communities which could come from those within them.

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