



A STUDY OF ESCAPISM IN *THE MINISTRY OF UTMOST HAPPINESS* BY ARUNDHATI ROY

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Abstract

A transgender is a person whose gender identity, expression, and behavior do not match the sexual orientation that they were born. The mismatched biological sense of male and female identities is subjected to social and family exclusion and prohibition from time to time because gender is a social construction. It sets heterosexuality as a benchmark for sexual functions. So, Transgenders are rejected by both family and society and they face insecurity as they cannot define themselves within the typical male and female boundaries. Hence, transgenders are eliminated and forced to live the life of an "Other". where the needs to live a normal life are restricted for them. In this circumstance, the study analyzes that transgenders use Escapism as a key to escape from cruel people and joins their hijras community and some try to escape from the cruel world by having suicidal behavior and thoughts. It is evident through the novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, that Roy has portrayed a character Anjum, a transgender woman who tries to join the hijras community to have a normal life like other women.

Keywords: Transgenders, Gender Discrimination, Rejection, Social Exclusion, Inequality, Escapism.

"Transgender women are finding some respect in India, but a traditional gender- nonconforming group-hijras-remains stigmatized". *The Conversation*. Mar 31,2022.

Our country celebrates diversity in culture, belief, and religion so vibrantly. Legally, every gender is treated respectfully, but

when it comes to transgender, there is still a taboo of inequality existing in our society. In India, according to the law transgender are categorized as the third gender known as 'Hijra'. Despite legal recognition, transgender people still face discrimination. However, according to society, this recognition has not consistently resulted in the provision of

equivalent rights and opportunities. Many transgenders are subjected to discrimination in every part of our country. They don't get to live in peace and harmony. The majority of transgenders are either illiterate or have less education due to their exclusion from their own families. Since they are not given educational opportunities, transgender result in unemployment and social exclusion, which hits their self-esteem and self-confidence hard because they are excluded from their homes and rejected by their families. So, transgenders try to escape from their houses to have a better life. Escapism resulted in lack of awareness and understanding among their families and society. According to them, escapism leads to fulfilling their basic and psychological needs to avoid trauma, pain, agony, anxiety, suicidal behavior, abusive relationships, and insecurities.

"The American Psychology Association defines escapism as the tendency to escape from the real world to the safety and comfort of a fantasy world". In the novel, Anjum's character escapes from the reality of her home and joins the hijra group to achieve her dream of living a normal life. Here, Anjum uses "Escapism" as a key to achieving her basic and psychological needs. Roy has portrayed Anjum's life in the novel as a reflection of the majority of transgender life as they try to escape from the unpleasant situations created by their families and society. Hence, the effect of escapism is to comfort or console them from their distressed circumstances.

The novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, written by Arundhati Roy and published in 2017, was her second novel. It was longlisted for the Man Booker Prize and was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. Roy is an Indian author well known for her debut novel, *The God of Small Things*. Roy was awarded the Lannan Prize for cultural freedom in 2003. She is a political activist involved in human rights and environmental causes.

India is a diverse nation with a rich mix of races and cultures, where factors like gender, class, and caste lead to discrimination among various groups. Particularly, Hijras experience significant challenges related to gender recognition, employment, housing, and healthcare. The discrimination and inequality they face make them feel inferior. Holmes (2004) writes, "Recognition of third sexes and third genders is not equal to valuing the presence of those who were neither male nor female". The recognition of the third gender is to promote and ensure equal rights and opportunities for individuals who do not identify as male or female. However, hijras, who identify as third gender and embrace a feminine identity, are distinct from typical Indian women. However, society tends to reject them as females and often holds negative perceptions of them. So, they were deserted and rejected to get their basic needs, such as food, shelter, protection, love, care, etc. Basic needs are important for an individual to lead a life, but for Anjum, the basic needs are rejected. This has resulted in the escapism of the character to fulfill the basic needs, psychological needs, and self-fulfillment needs. These needs can be analyzed through "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs" a theory of psychology explaining "human motivation". Maslow's hierarchy of needs was first introduced in Abraham Maslow's 1943 paper, "A Theory of Human Motivation". Maslow refined this theory in 1954 with his book "Motivation and Personality". There are five main needs of the hierarchy listed by Maslow they are physiological needs (food, water, shelter), safety needs (security, safety), Love and belonging needs (friendship, family), Esteem needs (prestige and feeling of accomplishment) and Self-actualization (achieving one's full potential). For the character Anjum, escapism happens for her survival when her parents and society neglect to provide her with the basic psychological and self-fulfillment needs because of her mismatched gender identity.

According to Abraham Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs*, he believed that 'having freedom of speech and freedom of expression or living in a fair society makes people achieve their basic, psychological, self-actualization needs easier'. In the case of Transgenders, freedom of speech and expression has been prohibited, which makes it harder to achieve their needs and creates an unpleasant situation. To avoid these unpleasant, depressing situations, transgender use escapism as a tool to fulfill their needs. Escapism provides psychological relief by escaping the depressing and insecure realities of an exciting life. In the novel, Roy brings out the society of hijras and has been to be their voice, of representing the struggle of being abandoned and alienated from society. Keeping the character Anjum, Roy portrays the life journey of an intersex baby born to a Muslim parent originally named Aftab by his parents. As an intersex kid, Aftab feels his female soul is trapped in a male body that doesn't feel like him. Meanwhile, he was forced into being a male child by his parents because the feminine self of Aftab has not been accepted by his parents which creates uneasiness for him. Aftab discovered femininity was deeply rooted inside him so he tries to escape from the home to join the hijras community. "Aftab eventually managed to insinuate himself into the Khwabgah. Finally, the day dawned when he was allowed in., he entered that ordinary, broken-down home as though he were walking through the gates of paradise" (p 20). This is one of the significances of Ajum's use of escapism as a key to joining the hijra's community. Transgenders are neglected to accept by families and society as how they are. This situation creates uneasiness about their identity and living.

As seen in the novel "Aftab stepped through an ordinary doorway into another universe. On his first night as a permanent resident of the Khwabgah, he danced in the courtyard to everybody's favorite song from everybody's favorite film" (p 25). Aftab urges to

escape into feminine. The convention of male into female referred to another universe. But his family attempted to stifle his identity as a woman. Because society has constructed heterosexuality are perfect than other sexualities. In *Understanding Identity*, Woodward says that the world's structure was shaped by gender distinctions, which assigned significance to societal separations. As per Michel Foucault's perspective, 'Gender is not an inherent aspect of human existence but rather a socially constructed facet of our experiences, influenced by historical, social, and cultural factors rather than biology'. Anjum's story underscored the difficulties of living in a society that adhered to an idealized concept of gender. Butler, suggests that we shouldn't view gender as something imposed upon us, but rather as a continuous process of self-construction. Anjum, who found herself in a male body and identified as a woman, embraced her female identity and sought to discover her authentic self. The transformation of Anjum was her need to feel the full version of womanhood. It was the conscious process of fulfilling the feminine version to attain her esteem and self-actualization needs. In the Hierarchy of Needs theory, Maslow says that "Satisfaction of the self-esteem needs leads to the feelings of self-confidence, worth, strength, capability, and adequacy of being useful and necessary in the world".

In the process of self-construction of Anjum, she was forced to be isolated from her family and society where she was not accepted because of her transformational identity. The isolation makes Anjum seek escapism to join a hijras group where psychologically and physically Anjum could find comfort and relief to lead a normal life. Here even after the rejection, Anjum stood strong to achieve her necessity with the help of esteem and self-actualization that has been built in the process of feminine transformation as seen in the novel. "Over the years Anjum became Delhi's most famous hijras. In interviews, Anjum would be

encouraged to talk about the abuse and cruelty that her interlocutors assumed she had been subjected to by her conventional Muslim parents, siblings, and neighbors before she left home" (p 26).

In the novel, the Khwabgah (House of Dreams) was Anjum's place of liberation and self-expression. "Once she became a permanent resident of the Khwabgah, Anjum was finally able to dress in the clothes she longed to wear – the sequined, gossamer kurtas and pleated Patiala salwars, shararas, ghararas, silver anklets, glass bangles and dangling earrings" (p 26). Khwabgah was a world in itself, it was considered hijras to be the abode of "special people", or "blessed people" who came with their dreams that could not be realized in the world. Anjum realized that hijras are far more removed from the ordinary world. She found that outside the world her double voice frightened the people and everyone feared being cursed by a hijra. Anjum faced isolation, discrimination, exclusion from others due to shallow reasons, misinformation, or unfounded beliefs of society. And she had to challenge gender inequalities and societal expectations.

Roy amplified the voice of the marginalized community by using Anjum/Aftab's narrative. Roy showed that India is not a utopia for hijras, rather they are always abandoned from all social rituals. In India, the deeply rooted caste system enforces divisions of purity and impurity among communities, contributing to a homophobic society where hijras are dehumanized. Roy portrayed the social prejudice of hijras as seen in the novel Anjum had the talent of singing and reciting the Quran like common children. But the students of music class teased Anjum by saying, "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!" (p 12). Anjum's gender identity was clouded by societal pressures, which was another significance of escapism that led her to quit music class to evade societal abuse, mockery, and intrusive curiosity. While her siblings

attended school, she remained isolated at home. Her world became smaller, severing social connections and leaving her feeling trapped and traumatized. In response, she yearned for a different life outside the strict limitations of societal norms.

Despite encountering numerous challenges in mainstream social environments, Anjum made an effort to adapt to the evolving world by using the key of escapism from unpleasant situations to a comfortable place. Transgender individuals must endure discrimination and economic difficulties. A shift in gender does not alter a person's emotional experiences, pain, suffering, care, love, or anger. When society fails to grasp this, it leads to expressions of dissent and protests. Feminism emerged in response to the marginalization of women, and likewise, in today's world, the transgender community requires empowerment following the hardships they have endured. This research is rooted in the idea that hijras deserve dignity and rights just like any other human being.

The novel, as a whole, depicts the constant belief in self-assertion, The dream of Anjum is to have a normal life apart from all the struggles she seeks to breathe normal air like everyone in society. She underwent a series of transformations, transitioning from being a boy to a state where she was neither male nor female physically and eventually identifying as a woman psychologically. She sought to redefine her life in the context of existing between genders. This ambiguity of not being strictly a man or a woman, or in a sense, both, led Anjum to explore various corners of the world. Khwabgah served as one of these places where Hijra individuals aspired to free their "Holy Soul" from the confines of their incorrect bodies. Khwabgah was distinct from the conventional world, often called "another world." Anjum termed this realm world, a place where she felt the concerns of the Hijra community were far removed from the ordinary world. When Anjum realizes the harsh reality of the world,

she urges to escape to her dream house called Khwabgah to fulfill her need for survival. The world needs to change its perception of gender differences. Gender is a social construction that is unstable. When society fails to understand that may ultimately lead to the destructive growth of the world.

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