



## GENDER DYSPHORIA AND THIRD SPACE OF HIJRAS IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S *THE MINISTRY OF UTMOST HAPPINESS*

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### Abstract

The word gender refers to the socially constructed roles and responsibilities that societies consider appropriate for men and women. But some people may be very uncomfortable with the gender they were assigned, sometimes described as being uncomfortable with their body (particularly developments during puberty) or being uncomfortable with the expected roles of their assigned gender. Gender dysphoria involves a conflict between a person's physical or assigned gender and the gender with which he/she/they identify. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, the second novel of India's most celebrated writer Arundhati Roy, begins by depicting the birth of Anjum, a hijra. Hijras are officially recognized as third gender in South Asian countries, being considered neither completely male nor female. Roy successfully reveals the plight of transgender community in the modern Indian scenario. Dignified and respectful position hijras held in the Indian society has been deteriorated and marginalized now. Being born as a transgender is considered as sin or crime, because society could fix only the gender roles of males and females which is based purely on sex. Anything outside the social norms of the community is not welcomed and society cannot understand or not willing to recognise the transgressive gender roles of the third genders. Being alienated from the main stream of society they just label them as prostitutes, thieves and criminals. They are not accepted even in the family or in the society. Even motherhood is stunned at the sight of a hermaphrodite baby. The novel renders the pain and complications faced by parents in the upbringing of transgender children. The transgressive gender roles of hijras force them to leave from the space of domestic sphere (family) and civic sphere (society) and they are forced to find out a third space for their own.

**Keywords:** gender dysphoria, hijra, transgender, transgressive gender roles, third space

The history of the hijra community's stretches back to antiquity. But now, with a new Supreme Court ruling, India's third gender has finally achieved full legal recognition. They are neither male or female. They can be eunuchs, intersex or transgender, have been part of South Asia's culture for thousands of years. They adopt female dress and

some other aspects of female behavior. Hijra's traditionally earn their living by collecting alms and receiving payment for performances at wedding, births and festivals. Eunuchs are celebrated in sacred Hindu texts such as the Mahabharata and the Kama Sutra. They also enjoyed influential positions in the Mughal courts.

When the British came to power in India, the community's fortunes changed.

The British Empire criminalized sexual activities "against the order of nature"... arguably including homosexual sexual activities under section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. Homosexuality has never been considered a crime in Hindu culture. In fact, Lord Ayyappa was born of Hari-Hara (Vishnu & Shiva). It is not a crime in any Smriti. Everyone has male and female elements. According to their dominance, tendencies show up & may change. Nobody should face discrimination because of their sexual preferences. To be branded a criminal for this is absurd. One of Hinduism's core teachings is that every being is Divine or a reflection of Divine qualities, regardless of one's outer attributes.

The British Government labeled eunuchs as criminals, thieves and prostitutes. Since then many have been ostracized – either for cross dressing or being intersex – and have gone on to form their own communities, around a guru or mother figure to provide emotional and financial security. Many even took to using a secret code language known as Hijra Farsi for protection. More recently, hijras have been seen as auspicious and are often asked to bless celebrations such as marriages and births. In India's larger cities this has waned, forcing many to rely on begging or prostitution. They are pushed into the peripheries of society due to the gender in which they are born, This results in the social exclusion and marginality. The marginalized people have no voice in any power structure and hence they are unable to express themselves. so currently more and more writers begin to write on the marginalized or internally colonized people with great prominence.

India's most celebrated writer and social activist Arundhati Roy writes about the problems of marginalized community in India. Her nonfiction, essays and public commentary take clear and sometimes controversial positions on globalization, neo-imperialism and the ongoing conflict with Kashmir. According to her new India was built on the backs of the poor. With the release of "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness," her second novel in 2017, Roy merges her energies as a fiction writer and an activist, shaping a rich narrative that's as complex

and multivalent as modern India. In fact, the book is full of characterization of marginalised experiences. We hear from the Muslims and the queer, the missing and the murdered, the dying and the dead. We read about the Gujarat massacre, the Bhopal disaster, the Sikh genocide and the public lynching of cow killers. We learn about the Kashmiri widows and the hunger strikes. It deals with some of the darkest and most violent episodes of modern Indian history. The novel takes us on an intimate journey of many years across the Indian subcontinent—from the cramped neighborhoods of Old Delhi and the roads of the new city to the mountains and valleys of Kashmir and beyond, where war is peace and peace is war.

As the book begins, in what appears to be the nineteen-fifties, 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 sits 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." 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. Here we can note that although he was brought up as a boy, he begins to feel a kind of confusion in his assigned gender roles. This condition is called Gender Dysphoria. It involves a conflict between a person's physical or assigned gender and the gender with which he/she/they identify. People with gender dysphoria may be very uncomfortable with the gender they were assigned,

sometimes described as being uncomfortable with their body (particularly developments during puberty) or being uncomfortable with the expected roles of their assigned gender. In the novel Aftab wants to get the gender role of a female. He is a female by psyche and hermaphrodite by birth, having a male organ. He thinks he has got the wrong body i.e. a female in a male body.

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 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." That day, and for many days, he follows her home, to a house with a blue doorway. 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. The process of removing their genitals is known as emasculation or nirvana. Although it is a very expensive surgery which they could not really afford, many Hijras do that. Because they could not bear the stigma of being a transgender. They make their living mainly as prostitutes.

Aftab thinks that he will die if he can't be like them as he thinks he is suffering from gender dysphoria. People with gender dysphoria may often experience significant distress and/or problems functioning associated with this conflict between the way they feel and think of themselves (referred to as experienced or expressed gender) and their physical or assigned gender. The gender conflict affects people in different ways. It can change the way a person wants to express their gender and can influence behavior, dress and self-image. Some people may cross-dress, some may want social transition, others want medical transition with sex-change surgery and/or hormone treatment. Socially transitioning primarily involves transitioning into the

affirmed gender's pronouns and bathrooms. 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.

People with gender dysphoria may allow themselves to express their true selves and may openly want to be affirmed in their gender identity. They may use clothes and hairstyles and adopt a new first name of their experienced gender. Similarly children with gender dysphoria may express the wish to be of the opposite gender and may assert they are (or will grow up to be) of the opposite gender. They prefer, or demand, clothing, hairstyles and to be called a name of the opposite gender. Aftab becomes completely satisfied only when he gets entry into the House of Dreams in the name Anjum.

His father never again speaks to him—or to her, as we should say now. Her mother sends her a hot meal every day, and the two occasionally meet at the local shrine. It might be the disapproval and unacceptance from the part of his parents to accept him as a hijra made him land into a group of transgenders. Anjum, six feet tall, in a spangled scarf, and tiny Jahanara in a black burqa. "Sometimes they held hands surreptitiously."

Anjum easily mingled with the inmates of the House of Dream. They talked about the problems they face in the society:

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.

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 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.

Here Anjum is again confused of her gender role. One of her housemates gives her a tranquilizer and puts her to bed. That is the last orgasm of her life. She has genital surgery, but her new vagina never works right. Sex is the least of her problems, though. 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. With Partition, in 1947, Roy writes, “God’s carotid burst open on the new border between India and Pakistan and a million people died of hatred. Neighbors turned on each other as though they’d never known each other, never been to each other’s weddings, never sung each other’s songs.” The consequences of that terrible event form the main story of the novel.

On a visit to a Gujarati shrine, Anjum is caught up in a massacre of Hindu pilgrims and subsequent government reprisals against Muslims, and retreats – at least temporarily shedding her brightly coloured clothing for a more masculine Pathan suit – to the graveyard. What first drives Anjum out of the Khwabgah and into the graveyard is trauma. While making a pilgrimage to a Muslim shrine in North India, Anjum and a friend get caught up in the infamous Gujarat riots of 2002. Hindu

nationalists, a rising force led by the state’s chief minister, whipped up anti-Muslim fury to such a pitch that the violence lasted for three days and killed as many as 2,000 people. So terrible was Anjum’s own experience during the riots (her friend did not survive) that she refuses to talk about it but instead renounces her hijra finery and adopts unisex clothes in drab, penitential colors. Her immurement, however, signals the novel’s sprawling expansion.

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Roy dissects life in India in the wake of the partition through the eyes of two characters: Anjum, a transgender woman who comes into her own only to find herself redefined by tragedy, turning to a cemetery in Delhi for refuge; and Tilo, a trained architect who journeys to the Kashmir region to reignite her on-and-off-again love affair with Musa, a freedom fighter. The run-down Delhi graveyard where the two women finally meet is a surprisingly convivial necropolis.

The Muslim cemetery is where Anjum, “like a fugitive absconding from herself,” withdrew from the bustling, gossipy world of the Khwabgah—a sort of dormitory for hijra, an officially recognized “third gender” with an established, if marginal, role in Indian culture. At first Anjum is little better than a specter inhabiting a tin hut built near her relatives’ burial sites, but over time old admirers and new friends (including an open-minded imam) begin to coax her out of her desolation. She expands the shed into a small house and then adds rooms on to that. She calls the place Jannat, or paradise, and rents to a motley assortment of outcasts. This is the ministry of the novel’s title, a home where each room contains not only a bed but also a grave.

It is in this graveyard Anjum and others get utmost happiness. These neglected people did not create a space for their own in the domestic sphere or in the social sphere. So they are forced to create a third space for their own in the run-down Delhi graveyard. The third space extends the notion of the real and the virtual by suggesting a hybrid space that allows remote participants to engage in social relations with one another at a distance. It is the space where the oppressed plot their liberation. In

the climax of the novel we can see that this cemetery acts as a shelter or paradise for all the refugees. Social boundaries and the importance of transgressing them have long fascinated Roy. In her famous work *The God of Small Things*, she shows a forbidden affair between a Dalit (or untouchable) servant and a higher-caste woman. It's one thing to defy an unjust taboo, but that novel also ends with the tender, incestuous union of its two central characters, a twin brother and sister. Roy is not the sort of author who likes to let her readers get too comfortable. In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, it's the living and the dead who sleep together, although only in the most literal sense of the word. This is a weird but also very Arundhati Roy vision of domestic (and political) bliss: to overflow every division between human beings, even the most profound division there is.

Many critics have compared *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* with Salman Rushdie's use of magical realism in *Midnight's Children*, but the comparison appears to be quite unfounded. Rushdie incorporated a contra-realistic thematic framework that sanctions the intervention of external supernatural elements for narrating the story of exploitation, deprivation or degradation and subsequent resuscitation of a nation, stretching from pre-colonial to the postcolonial period in its history. The protagonists of his novel are endowed with miraculous magical powers. In a sense, Roy's protagonists are also specially enabled individuals, not in terms of certain inexplicable, supernatural qualities, but in terms of their capacities to reinstate their socially or biologically subjugated identities and carve out an exemplary space for their atypical modes of living within the status quo itself. Thus, contrary to Rushdie, Roy redirects the readers' sensitivity towards miscellaneous realities of survival and dissentient modes of living of these oppressed identities that have and are continually undergoing myriad kinds of obliterations, but which simultaneously continue to resist obliteration and haunt modern social life. Thereby, they reveal a spectral permanency in their persistence to exist and make visible their invisibilised and forgotten histories. This spectral permanency is characterized by a continuous susceptibility to, in the words of

Cheah, "a certain kind of death that can no longer be thought within a vitalist ontology that asserts the unequivocal delimitation of death by life and the victory of the latter over the former". And yet, this very embodied subjectivity of marginalized voices, by virtue of its transgressive potential, enables resistance.

### Conclusion

Arundhati Roy's famous novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* begins with the birth of a muslim transgender Anjum. By birth he was a hermaphrodite. His parents brought him up as a boy. When he reach at the stage of puberty he was terribly confused with the gender roles in which he was born. His gender dysphoria begins here. He adopts the behavior and attitudes of females. This was not warmly welcomed by his family. Infact his mother was terribly disturbed when she saw the genital part of her child right after her childbirth. Even a mother is not willing to accept her child as it is. Because our society has assigned some gender roles to each individuals on the basis of their sex. They know only the roles of males and females. Anyone outside this is not considered as normal. But Aftab has developed a thirst to express himself. So she got entrance into the House of Dreams and changed his name and identity. Hence Aftab becomes Anjum and later on she had genital surgery but her vagina did not works. Her thirst or quest for motherhood can be seen in this novel. This shows the transgressive sexual desire of Anajum. The problems faced by hijras in our society is not less. Once she was caught up in the infamous Gujarat riot and traumatized. She left her Dream House and was pushed into the peripherals of the society. There she created a space of her own – a third space for her own liberation. Hence this graveyard has become the ministry of utmost happiness for her as well as all the refuges and neglected ones.

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