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FRAGMENTED IDENTITY: THE DISORIENTED LIFE OF THE TRANSGENDER WITH
REFERENCE TO ARUNDATHI ROY'S NOVEL, *THE MINISTRY OF UTMOST HAPPINESS*

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ABSTRACT

Transgender people experience gender dysphoria. Many transgender people face discrimination in the workplace and in accessing public accommodations and health care. Commonly referred to as Hijras, transgender people have long existed in Indian society having specific religious and sociocultural values. Arundhati Roy, through her fictional and political writings, always stood up for the marginalised and oppressed communities. In her second work, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Arundhati Roy tries to bring up the images of people who still live on the margins of Indian society. In this novel, she tries to break up certain stereotyped conventions about different communities in society.

Keywords: Arundhati Roy, The Ministry of Utmost Happiness, Transgender, Anjum, Aftab

Transgender are people whose gender identity or gender expression is different from the gender they were assigned at birth. Transgender, often shortened as Trans, is also an umbrella term; in addition to including people whose gender identity is the opposite of their assigned sex. It may also include people who are non-binary or gender queer. Other definitions of transgender also include people who belong to a third gender, or else conceptualize transgender people as a third gender. The term transgender may be defined very broadly to include cross-dressers. Being transgender is distinct from sexual orientation. Transgender people may identify as heterosexual (straight), homosexual (gay or lesbian), bisexual, asexual, or otherwise, or may decline to label their sexual orientation. The opposite of transgender is cisgender, which describes persons whose gender identity matches their assigned sex. Many transgender people experience gender dysphoria. Many transgender people face discrimination in the workplace and in accessing public accommodations and health care. In many places, they are not legally protected from discrimination.

We have so many allusions regarding transgender in Hindu Mythology. Our famous epic Mahabharata depicts the character of Brihandala, a transgender conversion of Arjun. Shikhandi, another character from the same epic is also transgender, born as a woman but brought up as a man. Moving beyond mythology, history also shows that transgender people were revered in India. During the rule of Mughals, transgenders were the protectors of the royal Harem and very often the confidantes of the royalty. The ancient Indian texts of Hindu, Buddhist and Jain origins describe them as the third gender. Commonly referred to as Hijras, transgender people have long existed in Indian society having specific religious and sociocultural values. Thus, in the Indian historical context, transgender people played a key role, especially in rituals of Hindu culture to celebrate marriages and

childbirth. However, with the establishment of British colonialism, Hijras – transgenders – were looked upon with ridicule. They were subjected to prejudice and were forced away from the mainstream to live in the shadows or on the margins of society. The attempts to erase their identity as a visible sociocultural category are still reflected in the lack of representation of their community in Indian fiction and entertainment media.

However, queer activism and queer historiography, in recent years have attempted to address this erasure of visibility of the dissident sexual citizens of India. Recent literary, cinematic and artistic works have been trying to capture the uniqueness of the queer experience. While colonization and the subsequent narrative of nationalization denied them space as well as articulation, queer activism helped this community in gaining some recognition, thus, gradually changing society's views about transgender. Transgender identity concerns women and men who are feminine or masculine in their bodies and have a cross-sex hormone in them. Transgender is often represented as villains, victims and minions of patriarchal heterosexual binary disorder. The lives of transgender are always being misinterpreted. They are often represented wrongly. The term transgender indicates different images like a cross-dresser, gender breed, gender-queer and so on. The term transgender brings a set of stereotyped images into the minds of people. Transgender feel agitated at times because their lives are misrepresented for scholarly benefits.

The transgender theory cannot be studied from one aspect alone, it needs to be analyzed from psychiatric, psychological and many other levels. The interdisciplinary subfields of transgender studies include transgender history, literature, film, anthropology and archaeology. The research theories within transgender studies focus on cultural presentation, political movements, and social organizations and lived experiences of transgender people. The community as a whole is almost always mistreated in society at the workplace, at home and in public spaces. They are almost always denied visibility in public spaces. They also go through various traumatic experiences like mental suffering, anxiety and depression. People who have transgender identity prefer to choose gender roles which are different from their biological and chromosomal sex roles. They prefer to live as the other gender by blending their masculine and feminine identities into their appearance.

The theory took a positive turn only with the arrival of Sandy Stone and Vivien Namaste. Sandy Stone published the work *The Empire Strikes Back: A Post Transsexual Manifesto* in response to Janice Raymond's anti-transsexual work 'The Transsexual Empire'. Jack Halberstam is another key figure in transgender studies. Halberstam's works deal with female masculinity and the concept of queer failure. Cooper can be seen as another important figure; she specialized in women's studies and later she shifted her attention to the LGBTQ community.

Tran's people are often forced to face insult and rejection in a wide range of forms such as bullying, discriminatory treatment at home and schools, harassment and physical/ sexual assault, and rejection from family, friends and colleagues. Even though the situation has changed, transphobic bullying exists in schools and the legal protection from the students is inadequate. They face similar situations at the workplace too. They have been isolated and have remained silent. They also have to be victims of hatred & criminal incidents. They have experienced verbal abuse & harassment from strangers in public places. Tran's people never report such cases to the police because they have a feeling that they will be treated without respect. Tran's people find it difficult to find proper housing because of the rising abuse from society, neighbours and also from members of their local community. They also fear disclosing their true identity to housing officers for the fear of mistreatment. Apart from all the mistreatment from society and the public, they have to face criticism and a lack of support from their family because of their transphobic gender identity.

Arundhati Roy, through her fictional and political writings, always stood up for the marginalised and oppressed communities. Roy's fictional works are as political as her non-fiction. Through her fictional and non-fictional works, she interrogates power equations by offering space and visibility for the downtrodden who otherwise occupy marginal space in society. Her fiction explores a wider range of social issues – patriarchy, casteism, religious intolerance, the invisibility of minority groups and even corporate globalization. Thus, her fictional and non-fiction works share the same consciousness and orientation concerning thematic, ideological and political relevance.

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness, her second work; Arundhati Roy tries to bring up the images of people who still live on the margins of Indian society. In this novel, she tries to break up certain stereotyped conventions about different communities in society. The protagonist of the novel Anjum 'born as Aftab' is a transgender who breaks all ties with his/her family when she finds it difficult to adjust herself to the norms of her family. She decides to leave her house and chooses a place to live in where people like her freely reside. At that place, Anjum could completely be herself and also can live according to her terms. Roy has given Anjum her own space and also the ability to make her own decisions. Compared to real-life situations of transgender, Anjum's condition is much better. She has a stand of her own at certain crucial points of her life and she stands strong in her points. The objective of this work is to examine whether Arundhati Roy has succeeded in representing her transgender protagonist as one with agency, articulation and visibility. It will also look at the various ways in which her transgender heroine negotiates space and power in her journey in life.

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness can rightly be told the story of those who exist on the fringes of Indian society. She has grouped into this mammoth novel a cohort of other transgender, political rebels, the poor, women with no voice or space, abandoned baby girls and the like - who are forced to live on the margins of mainstream society. Yet, the protagonist of this novel is Anjum, the transgender and it is through her that the other characters are brought to the reader. Hence, essentially this can be termed a novel of and about the transgender. This paper looks at the way the transgendered protagonist is represented in the novel. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* mirrors the people who exist on the fringes of Indian society. She encapsulates the rapidly transforming face of the Indian democracy with the increase of the Right-wing political ideology, the degenerating condition of the marginalized groups of individuals, the atrocities that are rampant in Kashmir valley and therefore, the environmental hazards that have surfaced because of the rapidly evolving urbanization.

The novel is inhabited by cohorts of others: Hijras, political rebels, the poor, women and abandoned baby girls. This novel shows these others carving out new spaces for themselves, defying convention, trying possible new lives, and testing out new roles. It aims to bring out the new life of these abandoned people who find shelter in the Jannat Guest House, which was built by a transgender woman named Anjum, who is the central character of the novel. The house was built in the graveyard which is an artistic effort of Roy to connect the margins with the mainstream to restore the lost grandeur of Indian societal structure. This is the place where all the margins intersect. Roy deliberately inverts the binary opposition between life and death to focus on the fact that the strength of humanity cannot be diminished even in the face of most grim circumstances. This peculiar guest house within the graveyard provides asylum to both humans and animals.

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness, an unconventional piece of fiction by Arundhati Roy unfolds with an unconventional setting, i.e. a graveyard, the place mostly stands for the dead is the habitat of the major character of this novel, Anjum. Anjum is introduced in the first few lines of the novel as she lived in a graveyard like a tree. The metaphor of the Tree is used to describe Anjum as she was the one who endured the months of casual cruelty as the tree would. The term Casual cruelty used by Roy suggests the hard life experiences and life-long sufferings of the main character introduced in the first few paragraphs of the text. "The cruelty which she was exposed to be casual as it has been part of her life for a long time and she must have grown used to the fact that she was fated to suffer abominably. After years of resistance, she didn't turn to see which small boy had thrown a stone at her and didn't crane her neck to read the insults scratched into her bark" (Roy, 2017: p. 1)

Even though these forms of insults and physical hurt caused to her by people are termed as casual cruelty. The readers are introduced to several other forms of cruelty Anjum must face and go through with life every day which might be impossible to endure for any human being. Other than the physical hurt caused by others, the insults are thrown at her casually by random people. People called her a clown without a circus, queen without a palace as she did not fit in her surroundings. Anjum unlike others was not able to fulfill the requirements of normality, she had an appearance which seemed to remind people of a clown, a laughing stock for people something they enjoyed looking at and feel disgusted. However, Anjum's reaction to these insults represents her peaceful nature, "she let the hurt blow through her branches like a breeze and used the music of her rustling leaves as a balm to ease the pain" (Roy, 2017: p. 1). Everything about the newborn baby was normal until his mother discovered the horrible truth; she was terrified of her discovery. Roy deliberately asks a question from

her readers "is it possible for a mother to get terrified of her baby?" (2017: p.23). The truth of Aftab's sexuality shook his mother. It was horrible for her to think that she had created a monster, an ugly being that in no way can have a good life. She even decided to kill herself and her child, the ugliness that child brought into this world could not have been tolerated by the people in any way, killing such an ugly being is rather better as compared to raising him/her. He wanted to be a Bombay Silk, the tall, slim-hipped woman wearing bright lipstick, gold high heels and a shiny green satin salwar kameez (Roy, 2017: p. 18).

He not only admires her but wanted to become her. He also wanted to cover up his ugliness, the most prominent thing in her being with the glittering dresses and shiny shoes, he wanted to apply the make-up, so he could hide the ugliness his face offered, which offended his fellows and compelled them to call him names and abuse him. A young innocent boy, Aftab did not know what was so different about him, what kind of ugliness he offered to his fellows which seemed to offend his fellows. The physical imbalance excluded him from all kinds of circles. The lack of acceptance of his ugliness and mockery of his fellows pushed him towards the Khwabgah, the place where all the dejected lived. "He knew it was the place he was destined to live in as he belonged there with all those rejected, bruised souls who tolerated the unusual stares and gazes of people passing by him. He sat there day and night as was the only place in his world where he felt the air made way for him." (Roy, 2017: p. 19)

It was the place where all those beautiful souls hid their ugly beings, the place where he would be respected for what he was true, a place where he can stop pretending and stop trying to fit in, his ugliness was accepted there without any judgment and he knew this was the only place which could give him the respect he never had or would get from the world he came from. The physical beauty of Bombay silk did attract Aftab but, it was the concept of getting rid of his ugliness which forced him to follow Bombay silk. Other than the acceptance that he knew he will only get at Khwabgah, the ugliness of the people residing inside Khwabgah attracted him. The ugliness he saw in himself and people reminded him about day and night was in abundance there.

"It was not the place for transgenders but the dejected ones as the most masculine person in the Khwabgah did menstruate (Roy, 2017: p. 21)." She was a woman, named Bismillah. Roy describes Bismillah as the most masculine member of that small community which consisted of all the downcast people of society. Other than masculinity, which is one of the worst traits any woman can possess, she was a small, wiry, dark woman with a voice like a bus horn (Roy, 2017: p. 21).

Other than these few exceptions that lived there, Nimmo Gorakhpuri, the youngest one among them is described by Roy in a very interesting way. "Nimmo was Short and chubby with thick, curly hair, stunning eyebrows curved like a pair of scimitars and exceptionally thick eyelashes. She would have been beautiful but for her fast-growing facial hair that made the skin of her cheeks look blue under her makeup, even when she had shaved" (Roy, 2017: p. 22).

Even though the drastic change broke her spirit, there were other more dreadful changes which affected not only his physical body but affected his mental state to a large extent. He lost his self-confidence and went deep into the rabbit hole when he developed Adam's apple that bobbed up and down. He longed to tear it out of his throat. The voice tore through and broke him hard; it split his soul into several pieces.

Voice generally has an important role to play in the characterization of a person as an ugly or beautiful one, however for Aftab, it had much more to do with his self-esteem, his confidence and his passion which he lost when his voice turned against him. Singing had a major role in keeping him sane and after losing her rhythm he was not the person he used to be anymore. He grew self-hatred due to this incident and he was repelled by his voice and scared himself each time he spoke. "He grew quiet and would only speak as a last resort after he had run out of other options. He stopped singing. No amount of persuasion, not even from Ustad Hameed himself, could coax a song out of Aftab"(Roy, 2017: p. 24).

Due to the psychological impact of this change even after Aftab turned into Anjum she went through a series of surgeries and used a lot of medicines to regain her original voice, which was quite impossible. The voice

which was gained after medical treatment sounded like two voices quarrelling with each other instead of one. It frightened other people.

Another important character in Roy's narrative is Zainab, a three-year-old child Anjum found in front of a mosque. The physical description of Zainab, when Anjum found her, gives way to the conclusion that she was not a beautiful child. Even though most children are beautiful she is described painfully as a thin mouse of a thing (Roy, 2017: p. 30). She was not healthy, fair, clean or smiling, the qualities which make any three-year-old adorable were all absent in her. She was crying however when Anjum offered her finger -she glanced up briefly, grasped it and continued to cry without a pause (Roy, 2017: p. 30). This gesture of trust and respect which Anjum was never used brought a moment of completion and deep satisfaction to her. Zainab trusted her despite all the ugliness her face offered and did not stare at her as if she was something unusual. She treated her like a human being, a person who offered help when she needed it and she took it generously without any doubt. She did not look at her too long or tried to understand her, she trusted Anjum's inner goodness, the morality she carried and the love her heart held within an instant.

While Zainab was a young dirty girl, with no physical appeal and the complexion of a mouse was not given any attention by the crowd which surrounded her. She was presumed to be a beggar or a homeless girl as no one came to her rescue. Her ugly appearance could not present her as a child who belonged to a respectable, well-off family, or even a child who had parents at all. She was rejected and so was Anjum, she took her to be her daughter and loved her more than she thought she could ever love someone. Not only Anjum but everyone else in the Khwabgah showered her unconditional love, they all loved her and soon she was one of them, in the land of ugly and deserted ones. This gives an insight into the morality and soft-natured aspect of these beings which are mostly known for sexual corruption and immorality.

Another instance which adds to this claim is the fly-over incident which is narrated by Anjum herself. As Anjum recalls, "the police broke up and all Hijras were physically abused by the police officers when their drivers tried to drive away. The driver was beaten while all the transgender were dragged out of the matador, kicked on their backsides as though they were circus clowns and instructed to scam, to run all the way home if they did not want to be arrested for prostitution and obscenity" (Roy, 2017: p.35).

Even though they were physically assaulted and tormented, Anjum recalls it as a "routine bit of humiliation for Hijras, nothing out of the ordinary" (Roy, 2017: p.35). Such an event which tends to disturb the psychological health of any living being called ordinary is quite significant. It further entails the fact that these people are used to the fact that they can never deserve the respect which is the right of every human being. However, the way they were treated by the policemen indicates their lack of respect in society. Other than the serious allegations of prostitution and obscenity they are treated as circus clowns', due to their physical attire and faces covered by makeup they are humiliated on regular basis.

Over the years Anjum became Delhi's most famous Hijra. Filmmakers fought over her, NGOs hoarded her and her number was exchanged with foreign embassies. The interviewers were eager to understand the cruel reactions of the relatives and parents but Anjum had a story contradictory to others. She underwent two corrective operations to enhance her lady parts, but despite medicines and operations, she was unable to completely transform herself. As the years progressed, Anjum felt a yearning to be a mother. God granted her wish as she found a lost child on the steps of the Jama Masjid. She tried to find her lost parents but her efforts failed. The novel has epic dimensions as it starts from the story of Anjum and forays into other social evils that plague modern India. It includes issues like caste system, terrorism, Naxalites violence and many others. Anjum becomes a part of the plot which the writer uses to portray the Gujrat violence. Anjum witnesses the madness of the riots that have tarnished the unity of Hindus and Muslims. Anjum was then unable to go back to her normal life; she became paranoid and started to cling to her adopted daughter.

Arundhati Roy in her writing has not once called any of these characters ugly, hideous or unappealing; rather she has portrayed them beautifully. Her descriptions are poetic however the descriptions of characters when discussed in the context of social standards for beauty and ugliness indicate the unpleasant appearances of Roy's characters when judged from socio-cultural scales. The physical appearance plays an important role in

the judgment of one's character everywhere, including south Asia. Therefore, any form of disability or misbalance in personality may portray an individual as evil and resentful creature. Furthermore, this ugliness of their physical appearance affects the lives of people by marginalizing them and creating and depriving them of their rightful opportunities to grow, learn and progress in their lives.

Arundhati Roy's novels draw our attention to the spaces that are populated by the subalterns and to the voices from the margins, be it in her first novel *The God of Small Things* (1997) or her second novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. With gender as a thematic concern in *The Ministry*, Roy adopts an innovative stance by introducing characters that break the stereotypes of gender. Spaces in India are constructed for heterosexual identities that are normative. But Roy's protagonists defy these binaries of gender since they traverse a spectrum of gender identities, and their concerns, conflicts and interactions with spaces form the thematic framework of this novel. Anjum, the Hijra, the intersex person, one of the protagonists in the novel, is introduced as living in the graveyard like a tree. When people called her names-clown without a circus, queen without a palace, she let the hurt blow through her branches, like a breeze and used the music of her rustling leaves as a balm to ease her pain (Roy 2017: p. 1). Her uniqueness as a person is emphasized by the novelist. "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 not Anjum, I'm Anjuman. I'm a Mehfil, I'm a gathering. Of everybody and nobody, of everything and nothing. Is there anyone else you would like to invite? Everyone's invited" (Roy 2017: p. 2).

Aftab's childhood is a regular one but as he grows older, his world begins to alter significantly. As a person conforming to the male gender, his life is far simpler and fits into the pattern of binaries. But spaces begin to shift as far as the young Aftab is concerned, as his identity as an individual emerges as a questionable one. From his mother's protective eyes, his foray into the real world is hugely challenging for the young boy. In the music class, the boys begin to tease and ridicule his shy feminine voice. "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 2017: p.12).

When Anjum gets lost in the outside world, the contemporary India, which polarizes society foregrounding a politics founded on Hindutva, the trauma rips her apart. It is beyond description. "She had had a haircut. What was left of her hair now sat on her head like a helmet with ear muffs? She was dressed like a junior bureaucrat in a pair of dark brown men's terry cotton trousers and a checked, short-sleeved safari shirt. She had lost a good amount of weight" (Roy 2017: p.46). "She is cold and distant, and she soon transforms Zainab too, without seeking her opinion or consulting the other members at Khwabgah. She returned with a completely transformed Zainab. Her hair was cropped short and she was dressed in boy's clothes, a baby Pathan suit, an embroidered jacket, the foot is with toes curled up like gondolas" (Roy 2017: p. 48).

This transformation is the result of fear, deep-seated and stems from insecurity. In the context of material space, this can be related to the transgression of boundaries. In the socio-spatial schema of gender, the boundaries of permissible behaviour are strictly delineated. Though Roy's Anjum doesn't go through the horrible experiences of sexual exploitation usually faced by members of the transgender community, Roy in her impeccable style has brought to light much of the cruelties faced by the community in society. The lack of a livelihood, the harassment from even police officials, and the ridicule by society are all there in this novel. At the same time, Roy also presents a transgender character who doesn't simply succumb to her wounds. Instead, she is a fighter, one who wouldn't lie down and take defeat, she fights back and tells society "you won't let me live amongst you, but I will live, no matter where, if it is the graveyard, so be it".

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