

# EXPLORATION OF INTERSEX STRUGGLE IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S THE MINISTRY OF UTMOST HAPPINESS

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## ABSTRACT

This paper aims to critically analyse the struggles of the intersex in Indian society referencing the novel of Arundhati Roy's The Ministry of Utmost Happiness. In general, every society recognises only two polarities, or sexes, based on the genitalia at birth which are male and female through the process of sex assignment. But in another case when the genitalia do not confirm whether it is male or female it is called intersex. When a person's internal reproductive system, external genitalia, and sex chromosomes do not correspond to a male or female, they are referred to as intersexual. Such intersexual persons do not belong to either gender, they are referred to as transgender or third gender. In India, the transgender community has endured centuries of social, political, and economic marginalisation and discrimination. They always keep away from the mainstream of society. The majority of transgenders face challenging upbringings and formidable obstacles in their adulthood. They frequently experience emotional and physical abuse, including sexual assault. They are abandoned and invisible in society because they do not fit into the established social norms, which leaves them with severe wounds, particularly to their identity. Despite facing hundreds of problems these people are creating new lives for themselves. Hence, this paper attempts to demonstrate their psychological and social struggles through the character of Anjum, a Hijra.

**Keywords:** Transgender, Hijra, Anjum, marginalization, struggle

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The term 'transgender' emerged in the 1990s as an umbrella term to encompass a wide range of gender-variant identities." (Stryker 15). All non-cissexual and non-heterosexual people, including transsexuals, transvestites, hermaphrodites, inter-sex people, eunuchs, impotents, homosexuals, bisexuals, androgynies, gynemimetics, emasculated, impotent, castrated, effeminate, transgendered, and so forth, are included under transgender also referred to as Hijra. In other words, all those who are somehow sexually anomalous or dysfunctional are considered the above. According to their narrative, the hijras or transgender people themselves like to distinguish between those who are born with ambiguous genitals and those who are made such through castration. They have grown into a well-known and integral part of Indian society, a distinct entity with its own culture but one that suffers severe prejudice and struggles for its fundamental rights. "Transgender people have always been part of human society, even if they haven't always been recognized or acknowledged" (Stryker 01).

This underrepresented gender is a topic of exploration in the realm of literature. Mahesh Dattani is the first prominent writer who wrote about hijras in his *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, In this play, a eunuch named Kamala illustrates the

irony of their lives that they celebrate the ceremony of marriage and childbirth. Still, they themselves are unable to get married or have children of their own. Kamla Das's poem *The Dance of the Eunuchs* is equally pitiful. It depicted the objectification of eunuchs who took on female identity and were therefore determined by social norms. The eunuchs dance to forget their agonies and aches. She writes, "It was hot, so hot, before the eunuchs came to dance, wide skirts going round and round They danced and They danced, oh, they danced till they bled" (07). It is possible to list numerous additional literary works that are nearly comparable in this way.

Arundhati Roy is a renowned Indian writer and social activist, well known for her advocacy of the human rights of the most vulnerable people and environmental justice. Being so aware of the situations of people who are shunned, marginalised, and forced into the periphery of society due to various reasons, she couldn't bear to ignore the vulnerable situation of the intersex in society and portray it in her second novel. Twenty years after her first novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997), won the Booker Prize, she wrote her second work of fiction, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017). The book intertwines the narratives of individuals traversing some of the most horrific moments in modern Indian history, including land reform that dispossessed impoverished farmers, the Godhra train burning (2002) and the conflict in Kashmir. It is an awful story and a decisive demonstration. One focuses on transgender woman Anjum and her struggles to support herself in Delhi. Her imagined world is frequently cruel. In the graveyard, the story begins and ends. It has the powerful voice of the Indian LGBT community in modern India. Arundhati Roy's genuine concern for sentiments and heartfelt aspects was evident in the opening lines of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, where she depicted intolerance, brutality, and a shameful disregard for humanity.

In the novel, Anjum is born the fourth of five children of Jahanara Begum. The first three are girls and she has been wanting a boy. Jahanara is devastated to know that her child is intersex "Anjum was not a man, nor was she a woman. She was a hijra." (Roy 11). She was in a huge panic, and even considered ending her own life and that of the baby, as "Everything was either masculine or feminine, man or woman. Everything except her baby." (Roy 8). But she kept it secret and gave her a masculine name Aftab. This lack of straightforward gender roles affected her mother which caused her to begin the process of Othering her own daughter. Furthermore, when her father discovered the secret, "he embarked on the cultural project of inculcating manliness in Aftab." (Roy 17) Gender is a cultural construct as Michel Foucault argues according to Spargo, "sexuality is not a natural feature or fact of human life but a constructed category of experience which has historical, social and cultural, rather than biological, origins" (Spargo 12). A person's identity is defined by his body and sexual identity is a society which is a repressive and negative force. Therefore, power relation occurs, and it is centralized by a group of people and it includes the hierarchical divisions based on social, political, and economic practices and institutions. Roy depicted the polarisation of gender and race. In relation to the identity of hijras, who are viewed as inferior, untouchable, and marginalised in Indian society. Woodward writes in *Understanding Identity* (2003), "The world was ordered by gender divisions with gender giving meaning to social divisions" (109). Gender is linked to the social categories of class, ethnicity, disability, and sexuality. The Hijra group faces social division and segregation due to disparities in sexual orientation. In India, they are viewed and discriminated against as belonging to a third gender.

As Aftab grew older, he developed a passion for music but had to give up his studies. He went on to take music classes even after turning nine years old. He could recognise a tune after just one listen and had a lovely, genuine singing voice. People were initially amused and even supportive, but soon after that, other children started ridiculing and snickering. "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). The third-gender community in India is continuously struggling for civic rights. They receive very little attention from society, and they are unsure about what lies ahead for them. They grovel for their lives. Roy has conveyed Anjum's transition, hardship, and struggle well in the text, which serves as a metaphor for all transgender people living in a democratic country. Because society has failed to grant the community equal rights, they are seen as humiliated.

Aftab entered a different universe permanently when she was fifteen years old. The next night he was given a green Khawabgah dupatta and inducted into the customs that formally constituted him a member of the Hijra community, along with the rules and ceremonies that had been started to do so. Aftab was forced to leave 'Duniya' and become Anjum. The household's chief and a disciple of Ustad Kulsoom Bi explains Hijra's suffering during a talk with Anjum:

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 could now wear the clothing she had always wanted to wear. She learned the method of communication with the spread-fingered Hijra clap. When she turned eighteen, Hijras from all around the city came there. It was her first time wearing a sari, a crimson 'disco-sari.' It seemed she was a new bride on her wedding night. When she woke up, she was disappointed to see that her lovely new outfit, which looked like a man, was an expression of her sexual satisfaction. She screamed in agony that she had wounded herself, feeling embarrassed and howling like a wolf while striking herself in the head and between her legs. She was calmed by Ustad Kulsoom Bi. She explained that the name 'Hijra' refers to a body that holds the holy soul. One such particular place where the Hijra people desire to be freed is Khwabgah. "Holy Soul" is imprisoned in the incorrect body. Anjum strives to reinvent her life through her transformations. They had always yearned to become mothers, but it remained an unattainable ideal. "Anjum's body was a battleground" (123).

At forty-six, Anjum departed from the Khwabgah. Her mother was bedridden and her father had passed away. She spent the rest of her life living next to her father in a graveyard that she had discovered. It marked the start of her new world. Anjum appeared to be a lifeless body in the graveyard, so depressed and hopeless that she was not even bothered by jinns or ghosts. Facing rejection and isolation from family, community, and society her feelings had been destroyed. To survive and thrive, nevertheless, she courageously battled all the evil forces both external and internal. Anjum gradually started to enclose the graves of her relatives and construct rooms around them. She struggles to reconcile biological and social identities. She started renting these rooms out to destitute travellers. She identified her guesthouse as 'Paradise,' or 'Jannat.' Jannat developed into a Hijra hub over time. With her peers, she celebrated Eid and Diwali in a grandiose manner in her paradise. Anjum has built a place called "Jannat Guest House and Funeral Services" for people who have lost all purpose in their relationships with family, community, religion, caste, and class. Anjum is conscious of how tough it would have been for her to feel like she didn't belong or fit in anywhere. Anjum's condition as a transgender person in the world a state of emptiness and non-existence is reinforced by the graveyard. Additionally, the names that the people who live in the graveyard give Anjum also highlight her marginalised status in society. The people in the graveyard are highlighting the reality that she is an individual without a context or a role in society by referring to her as a "clown without a circus" or a "queen without a palace."

To get over the ambiguous state of her existence, she attempts to uproot and destroy the lines that separate the living from the dead and the state of being from non-existence. She describes the graveyard as a paradise in an attempt to reduce her anxiety about dying. She thus claims that she was dying at the graveyard rather than residing there when the municipal authorities forbid her from doing so. In the end, Anjum's graveyard home becomes a secular, interfaith haven where people can find comfort from the chaotic outer world through sheer willpower.

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 04).

For her, it turns into "Jannat," and other downtrodden individuals find refuge there. In this way, Roy illustrates the struggles of the transgender to reconcile her biological and social identities.

## 2. CONCLUSION

The term transgender itself is a socio-cultural construct associated with the two most prominent genders in society: masculinity and femininity. The prejudices of the society did not align with the beliefs of Hijras. They do not have equal rights because they do not fit into this gendered society. Their emotions are imprisoned and they dwell in a male body. They constantly struggle with identity crises in this cliched society because of the traditional roles that men and women play in it and they have a feeling of humiliation and embarrassment as a result of social stigma. Therefore, this paper examined the idea that Hijras are also human beings and when it comes to an accepting heart, gender is irrelevant. A person's emotions, sorrows, sufferings, concern, love, and rage remain the same regardless of gender. Hence, they must have right to survive in the same way.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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