



The 'Social Space' of the Cemetery in Arundhati Roy's The Ministry of Utmost Happiness

Dr. Deepthi S.

Assistant Professor in English, Government First Grade College, Channapatna, Karnataka, India

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Abstract— Lefebvre's notion of 'producing space' as opposed to what he says is the widely held idea that 'empty space' is prior to whatever ends up filling it forms the basis of study for this paper. Positing that space is a social product, Lefebvre goes on to discuss the contours of the production of this space. Within such a framework the paper tries to examine the notion of space as produced in Arundhati Roy's latest novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. It delves especially on the space of the cemetery trying to understand not just the discourse that creates the space but also the changing dimensions of the space within the novel. The cemetery in the novel becomes a home for Anjum, a transgender and several others like her who are rejects of the mainstream society. However, the way the home extends itself, swallowing the graves as it grows indicates a kind of production where the marginalized starts producing and extending its boundaries over the mainstream. Thus the social space of the cemetery in the novel acquires new dimensions and an earlier discourse associated with that space- a discourse of death, loss, grief and pain gets displaced with a different discourse of home, life, joy etc. The cemetery is therefore not just examined as a mental space but also as a social space as propounded by Lefebvre and the paper attempts to consider different possibilities in examining this space



Keywords— Social space, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Lefebvre, Transgender identity.

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* very convincingly seems to elucidate Lefebvre's notion of social space. The novel pits several spaces – nation, city, and home in dialectical relationship with each other. Besides these spaces, the novel places at its center, the space of the graveyard which becomes a home to the protagonist. All these spaces within the novel are both produced and lived in by the members. The process of producing spaces in response to capitalistic needs and nation building demands echo Lefebvre's notion of social space referred to in his works on *State and Space*. The paper attempts to read the novel through the idea of social space that Lefebvre propounds and follows these spaces as they unfold in the novel examining their production and boundaries. This novel can be seen as a critique of contemporary spatial representation and practice and presentation of modes of resistance and examples of differential spaces as proposed

by Lefebvre. Towards this end, the paper first attempts to summarize Lefebvre's notion of social space and then moves on to examine this concept through the novel.

Lefebvre says that space is socially produced. Lefebvre's exposition of social space involves the following arguments. He says that space is not apriori, an empty container as believed. It is produced by language and also produces its language. Its boundaries are constantly being drawn, defined, redefined and modified according to the needs of the society. If the argument holds that space is physical, that one can perceive it, it does only as long as one is speaking of the medieval or pre-medieval times. As long as one could perceive/establish space through one's body or physically one could speak of any other space other than social. But after the advancement of technology, space has been broken into fixed units which could be mapped over the land and therefore a system of abstraction is in place.

This abstract space which is produced and perpetuated through grids, plans, and schedules is utilized and dominated by the capitalist system of production. We continue to live like this because “socially produced space is held in space and time through administrative policies, social conventions, and technological systems of living so

that each day as people wake up to an alarm, commute to work, watch television, or pay bills, this system of space and time is perpetuated and reproduced”(Giesecking 2014). Lefebvre suggests a tripartite model to explain the production of such an abstract social space which is best represented by the Table 1 below

Table 1: Spatial Triad

Spatial Practice	Representation of Space	Representational Spaces
Physical space (nature)	Mental space (abstractions)	Social space (sensation/action)
Perceived	Conceived	Lived
Daily routines align with routes between places	Scientists, planners, technocratic subdividers	Inhabitants and users (artists who just describe)

Each of these exists in dialectical tension: spatial practice, representations of space and representational spaces. This is how the abstract space of contemporary practice of capitalism is produced according to Lefebvre. All the three are not different but flow into each other. The physical space of a house, temple, church, library etc. is definitely influenced by our mental image and social understanding of it. It is characteristic of a society. Similarly, the represented space which is in the minds of planners, etc. has some physical form and social behavior within it. This is conceptualized space and brings together what is perceived with what is conceived with what is lived. This is a dominant space. And the representational space is the lived experiences and is highly relational. This is lived through its symbols and images and is the space for artists and others. Lefebvre illustrates the three in great detail. What is more significant is the nexus between the state and the capitalistic forces in defining and appropriating the social space. Lefebvre provides a comprehensive analysis of the state's relation to space, both in terms of the material spaces of the national territory and the country/city relation, and also in terms of the State's own inherent spatiality as a territorial-institutional form. He also explores diverse strategies through which states attempt to mold and reshape the spaces within and beyond their territorial jurisdictions. States, Lefebvre suggests, attempt at once to homogenize, to hierarchize, and to fragment social spaces (Lefebvre 2009).

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness follows the protagonist Anjum and Tilottama through their life's journey. It traces the journey of a transgender Anjum from the marginalized space of the Khwabgah in Delhi, her victimization within the dominant spaces of Delhi and Gujarat and finally her establishment of a new space in the cemetery through the Jannat House. Similarly Tilottama traverses through different spaces of the nation-state before finally settling down with Anjum at Jannat House. In the different social

spaces represented within the novel, one can locate the three dimensions discussed by Lefebvre. The novel shows the privileging of certain spaces and also displays fissures and challenges, appropriation and dissent within these spaces. The dominant space in the novel too is dictated by capitalism and political rule. Capitalism eats into the physical space changing it to meet market demands and reshapes it accordingly. Hence Delhi and the suburbs change their physicality, losing their forests and tribal lands for development symbolized through innumerable flyovers and unrecognizable repetitive buildings and shopping malls. Thus state controls and produces space. “Spaces that were once unoccupied-mountains, the sea-enter into exchange, become commodities, and are occupied by the enormous new industries of leisure and culture” (Butcher 2011). In the last scene of the novel, Saddam a member of Anjum's Jannat House takes all the inmates to a mall. The mall however, was once his village and his father died there. The others jokingly comment that the mall is the world's mazar and the mannequin shoppers are ghosts trying to buy what no longer exists. In a sense this Duniya is dead, built on dead farmers and people who lost their lands to development. In a similar indictment of the state's role in appropriating space, the security guard of the toilet Gulabiya dreams about his village that still exists. “It is not at the bottom of a dam reservoir, fish didn't swim through his windows, crocodiles didn't knife through the high branches of the silk cotton trees, and tourists didn't go boating over his fields, leaving rainbow clouds of diesel in the sky. In his dream his brother Hariya wasn't a tour guide at the dam site whose job was to showcase the miracles the dam had wrought. His mother didn't work as a sweeper in a dam Engineer's house she once owned. She didn't have to steal mangoes from her own trees. She didn't live in a resettlement colony in a tin hut with tin walls and a tin roof that was so hot you could fry onions on it”. Thus physical space undergoes transformation as per the state demands fulfilled through

administrational policies and rules. The new space that emerges is the space of the urban planners and engineers and is a representation of the state as visualized by the state through capitalistic lens. However, within such a space social conventions suggest hierarchy and exploitation. Besides this, there is nothing that is unique or outside language within such a space. Repetition becomes the norm and every building looks like the other and this is ensured to meet capitalistic demands and retain class divisions. Lefebvre's contention that the representation of space is deliberate and the practice of representation is to ensure maximum capitalistic gains through real estate dreams, highways, flyovers, expressways etc. finds its resonances within the novel quite explicitly (2009). In a specific scene, Saddam follows Tilo on his horse and enters the suburbs of Delhi. This space is a replica of state defined capitalistic space. Saddam Hussain and Ishrat the – beautiful on their way to search for the child enter that part of the city they oughtn't to be in. "there are no signs to forbid their entry" but as the author says, "everything was a sign that any fool could read: the silence, the width of the roads, the height of the trees, the unpeopled pavements, the clipped hedges, the two white bungalows in which the rulers lived". This is the planned homogenized space of the urban planners. Such an abstract space, Lefebvre says, is the space of capitalism and neo capitalism, "which includes the 'world of commodities', its 'logic' and its worldwide strategies as well as the power of money and that of the political state". Such an abstract space is founded on the "vast networks of banks, business centres and major productive entities, as also on motorways, airports and information lattices" and has homogeneity as its goal as it seeks to establish the capitalist trinity of land-capital-labour that is global, fragmented and hierarchical" (2009). And, for him "repetition has everywhere defeated uniqueness, that the artificial and contrived [the abstract space] have driven all spontaneity and naturalness from the field, and, in short that products have vanquished works". Lefebvre says that "there is no need to subject modern towns, their outskirts and new buildings, to careful scrutiny in order to reach the conclusion that everything here resembles everything else" (Lefebvre 1991).

However, as Lefebvre says, the represented and the actual lived space which is the representational flow into each other. The boundaries cannot be rigid. In the novel, as Saddam follows an auto and passes the flyover, "the city now grew less sure of itself" because hospitals were so full of sickness that patients and their families had spilled out and were camped on the roads. Families cooked on the street, cutting onions, boiling potatoes and hung their washing on tree guards and railways". This is the lived

space which in actuality is different from the represented space.

As observed earlier, the novel seems to illustrate every aspect of social space elucidated by Lefebvre. According to Lefebvre, domination and appropriation are inevitable in marking social space with domination ultimately winning. While state ultimately appropriates and dominates the space, it does face resistance (2009). However, resistance is also contained within the state apparatus. The perfect foil for containing resistance is found in the novel in the space of the Jantar Mantar. It houses resistance while simultaneously containing and limiting it. Jantar Mantar is a space for revolutionaries, dreamers, idlers, crackheads, crackpots, freelancers, wise men. It houses "anti-corruption canopy", Gandhian activists, and the second freedom struggle. The same space also houses a group that asks for Hindi to be the national language, for Bhopal gas tragedy victims, waste recyclers and sewage workers and Manipuris for revoking armed forces act, Tibetan refugees, Kashmiri mothers whose sons had gone missing. Some of these protests have been going on for years and the tragedy has lost its impact. The space is earmarked for protests but it also carries the earlier associations of being a tourist spot showcasing sundials which is why tourists are found walking through it unmindful of the people protesting there. The fact that Jantar Mantar is a space always already inscribed within the dominant space is best corroborated by two protestors making a documentary film "Protest and Resistance". They want Anjum, who has gone there as a bystander to look into the camera and say "Another world is possible" or "Doosri Duniya Mumkin Hain". These film makers have no idea what Duniya meant in Anjum's lexicon and she explains to the two "Hum Doosri Duniya Se Hain" indicating that she already exists in a different/another world and being in a separate world is not what is needed but being part of the same world. The two therefore, the dominant and the dominated exist side by side.

In contrast to this, is the space of the Khwabgah, housed within Shahajanabad near the Red Fort. This space can be read as representing the third dimension of social space that Lefebvre mentions, the actual lived space. In describing this space, the narrator says, "Once they crossed the moat and entered the fort, the city ceased to exist for them. "Inside the fort it was a different world, a different time, a different air (that smelled distinctly of marijuana) and a different sky (filled with kites as opposed to electric wires)". This is their appropriated space very different from the space of the state financed architects and planners, but like it happens, very soon this space is also slowly appropriated by the state. Within the dominant space, there are hidden spaces, spaces which are present yet absent, in this case, the Khwabgah where the Hijras live. Spaces are in a constant flux. They

keep changing their boundaries, definitions, markers etc. Hence a space which may not have been in much demand can soon become a sought after market place depending upon how it is developed and the values assigned to it. Neil Smith says "Large scale economic crises may lead to certain areas of cities going into decline because of neglect by property owners. Real estate prices fall and conditions further decline until these areas can be re-conquered by pioneering artists and marginalized LGBTQ looking for affordable spaces to work and live. For property owners, this re-entrance of means and chic signals an opportunity to reinvest, improving the quality of the neighborhood and open it to mainstream residents" (Gieseking 2014). Hence the same space can acquire new values and dimensions.

In spite of this, when the dominant space rejects them, pushes them further from its defined boundaries, the marginalized need to appropriate new spaces. In the novel, the Hijras including Anjum are displaced from the dominant space through several state sponsored mechanizations. The first instance is when they are shoed away from a wedding where they had gone dancing because of the new law introduced by Sanjay Gandhi on the maintenance of internal security act. The second instance is visibly felt in the Khwabgah when they are all glued to the TV during the twin tower attack and under Vajpayee, there is an effort to declare India a Hindu nation and a growing antagonism towards Muslims is felt. The space of the Khwabgah is disrupted through the entry of the outside space. Gayatri Mantra makes its entry into the Khwabgah just as Anjum starts dressing differently after her traumatic experience in Gujarat. Further, Delhi is constantly changing. The abstract space of history is being reconfigured with the Gujarat Lalla taking over Delhi, the narrator says. Some of the changes are felt within the space of Shahajahanabad where the Khwabgah is housed. Shahajahanabad was built as a walled city and encompassed the red fort and the Jama masjid. Once a beautiful pace, Kulsum Bi claims they are not just Hijras from any places but the Hijras of Shahajahanabad whom the rulers trusted with their wives in the zenana. Kulsum Bi's space in time is relatively fixed, in the sense that she believes that the Hijras had a special space assigned for them during a different time period. There is reference to the Hijras in the Light and Sound show in the Red Fort when amidst the sound of girls laughing, there is a giggle of a court eunuch. That is a proof of their being part of the royal palace and this is a momentous occasion for her. "The moment passed in a heartbeat. But it not matter. What mattered was that it existed. To be present in history, even as nothing more than a chuckle, was a universe away from being absent from it, from being written off altogether. A chuckle, after all, could become a foothold in the sheer wall of the future". When she hears the Hindu version of the

Ramayana and the place of Hijras there, Kulsum Bi said "so we are remembered as the forgotten ones." It is better to be forgotten than being denied existence and the new space seems to deny them their existence choosing instead to make and market products. The Light and Sound Show is slowly chastised and a new time is being created with a new tale, a government approved version. All said and done, the appropriated space will soon again be re-appropriated and dominated and the Khwabgah too slowly loses its members.

Thus the novel through the movement of its characters elucidates each one of the aspects of social space discussed by Lefebvre whether it is the highly capitalistic space of Delhi, the hegemonic space of the nation state asserting itself on Kashmir and Gujarat or the resisting spaces of the Khwabgah and Jantar Mantar. Besides illustrating Lefebvre's understanding of social space, the novel also seems to posit an alternative space that Lefebvre calls differential space. To go beyond the social space defined by the state, Lefebvre says that there needs to be a "differential space that would dissolve the social relations of abstract space and generate new, heterogeneous relations that accentuate difference and "shatter the integrity of the individual body, the social body and the corpus of knowledge" (1991). In another instance, Gieseking observes how Lefebvre places body as a useful way to locate and understand how space is socially produced. She says that space structures and is structured by a great array of social relations, including gender, sexuality, race, age, language and disability. Within the novel, in the protagonist Anjum, one can see the emergence of such a space. It is the Hijra body that defies the state defined space. Not being divisible by gender, religion, nation etc. the unitary body of the Hijra becomes the space that cannot be appropriated or dominated by the State. It is a space in constant flux defying all definitions. Anjum says, "I am not Anjum, I'm Anjuman, I'm a mehfil. I'm a gathering. Of everybody and nobody, of everything and nothing", denoting the need for challenging the abstract social space already privileging, dominating and to establish a differential space creating new meanings. Differential space then "celebrates the bodily and experiential particularity as well as the nonnegotiable 'right to difference'" and "acknowledges the centrality of embodied experience to the production, reproduction and contestation of urban space" by forging its own appropriated space (Butcher 2011). When she is forced to appropriate the space of the graveyard, Anjum marks the boundary of that space physically and not through language. Anjums' body itself turns into a spectacle and marks the boundaries of her new space. Her body is the unified body not the disassociated self. "For months she lived in the graved like a ravaged feral spectre, out-hunting every resident djinn and spirit, ambushing bereaved

families who came to bury their dead with a grief so wild, so untethered that it clean outstripped theirs". The primal physical and organic disassociated self of the Hijra becomes this new differential space. Nimmo Gorakhpuri's comments in the novel that while the outside world worries about children's admissions, beating husbands, riots, the riots are within them, inside them. She says, "The war is inside us, Indo – Pak is inside us" suggesting that within their body the outside space is unified.

Apart from this, Lefebvre indicates that the differential space has to free the representational space from all symbolic associations and reconstitute the space in a new manner. It has to destroy an entire corpus of knowledge and create an alternative. Within the novel, the space of the graveyard achieves this. Anjum's Jannat House gives birth to a new space which does not confine itself to the state dominated capitalistic space. It is not controlled or manufactured by the state. Such a space, Lefebvre says is achieved through 'autogestion', where it creates itself (Lefebvre 1991). It is this space that will counter neo capitalism's abstract space privatized through urban décor and design and the development of fake environments. Thus Lefebvre's differential space is held up as the solution to the "vast machine, an automation, capturing natural energies and consuming them productively". This differential space then is "the space of what socialism ought to be, a space that doesn't look superficially different but that is different" (Butcher 2011). By doing so a new spatial code can be constructed "that is, of a language common to practice and theory, as also to inhabitants, architects and scientists" allowing the recapturing of the "unity of disassociated elements" (2011). To recapture the unity, a new code has to be constructed from the beginning without any hierarchy. Such a new space should prioritize the physical if at all it remains. The choice of the graveyard in the novel seems to perform precisely this function, robbing the abstract space of all fixed associations and symbols, and re-symbolizing it. The boundaries that define the graveyard seem to fluctuate, become permeable during the day and night. The flying foxes drift to the city at night and the crows come home (the coming of the crows is a kind of homecoming) indicative of the return to the physical nature of space. The vultures (custodians of the dead) have been wiped out due to poisoning and ironically it's the city that wipes out what it establishes. It has represented the graveyard as the space outside, a space for keeping death and by extension diseases at bay. Anjum draws the boundaries of her new home near Mulaqat Ali's grave and makes the space between two other graves as her bedroom. Her grief and desolation, which is elemental becomes her defense and protects her because it has been unleashed from all social protocol. The space of the graveyard with its

associations of the forbidden territory, a place for only the dead starts creating replacing vocabulary as it is being created. Hence each time the word home is mentioned the word graveyard is also mentioned beside it in the novel. Slowly Anjum makes a physical boundary by constructing a temporary shed with the help of Mr. Gupta. Even without the physical boundary, Anjum is successful in marking a boundary with her body. When she is sitting on one of the graves and listening to music with Ustad Hameed, the audience constituting vagabonds and drifters gather outside "the invisible boundary of what had by consensus been marked off as Anjum's territory". And slowly she strengthens her space as "gradually the fort of desolation scaled down into a dwelling of manageable proportions". It became home, a place of restful, reassuring sorrow- awful, but reliable. Her tin shack starts growing. It grows into a hut that can accommodate a bed, and then into a small house with a little kitchen. Though the outside of the house is kept rough and unfinished so as to not attract attention, of the Duniya, the inside is plastered and painted and given the semblance of a proper house. The municipal authorities visit her every few months with threats to evict her saying living in the graveyard is strictly prohibited and she must demolish unauthorized constructions. Anjum's response to them is that she is not living there but dying in it. Within this space the boundaries between living and dead are not clear. From a space for the dead, the graveyard grows into a space for the living.

Jannat House in the graveyard thus becomes a new space and one can read this space as the differential space proposed by Lefebvre. When Lefebvre talks about differential space, he "considers the challenge of creating a qualitatively different, socialist form of socio-spatial organization based upon what he also terms "the right to space"" (Lefebvre 2009). In that sense, Jannat house becomes a kind of socialist space where the forces of production are distributed and shared and not dominated and controlled. It becomes an alternative to the dominant space not ruled by selfish capitalist interest but a plural multicultural space that may however in due course, inevitably once again get into the same vicious circle of development. The space of Jannat House gets reconstituted both physically and in representational terms. Each room has a grave or two and a bed. The words room and grave are used almost interchangeably. Anjum also starts renting out her rooms but she realizes there are not many takers as the setting and landscape were not to everybody's taste. The setting and landscape still carry associations from the earlier period. Slowly these associations get erased as Jannat House starts growing and getting more inmates – more Hijras, other outcasts of the society like Saddam Hussains and the Guptas etc. Jannat House challenges all hierarchies.

Everybody is involved in the production, Tilo teaches, Saddam stitches and washes the dead bodies and everyone is treated equally. In fact, there are advantages in staying there. There are no power cuts because Anjum steals her electricity from the mortuary. In a way, Jannat House becomes more privileged than the outside world because the city's paupers who lie there in air conditioned splendor have never experienced anything of the kind while there are alive. Slowly Jannat guest house turns into a funeral parlor- with a proper bathhouse, asbestos roof and cement platform for bodies to be laid out on. At Jannat house the "rules for the dead are the same as for the living - esoteric- warm, welcoming smiles or irrational roars of rejection". Jannat House grows into a parallel world where only the rejects of the Duniya are allowed. Jannat house and funeral services becomes slowly a part of the landscape that nobody questioned its provenance or its right to exist. It is a differential space in this sense that it is neither represented nor is it the lived social space of the Duniya. In fact, it is a new space where, "The battered angels in the graveyard that kept watch over their battered charges held open the doors between worlds (illegally, just a crack) to that the souls of the present and the departed could mingle, like guests at the same party. It made life less determinate and death less conclusive". With the arrival of Miss Jabeen and Tilo, Jannat House starts looking more like the space Lefebvre seems to describe. Jannat House gets a people's school, a people's pool, and a people's zoo. The new space is in the

process of being born as it is being lived. An organic process seems to be in place where differences are celebrated and equality becomes paramount. Jannat House is a contradiction to the Duniya. While things are going bad in the Duniya, Jannat House is thriving. Creation is at the heart of Jannat House so much so that during the funeral ceremony, the Gayathri mantra is chanted invoking wisdom and the unity that underlies creation. The novel ends with the birth of this new world reminiscent of the Noah's ark albeit filled with the outcasts of the dominant society, banished Hijras, lower caste and marginalized people, injured animals including cows, birds, ram and tortoise.

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