



Gendered Spaces: A Critical Exploration of Transgender Identity and Gender Discrimination in Arundhati Roy's "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness"

Shimna Gopaladhas

Independent Researcher, Former MPhil English Student of Nesamony Memorial Christian College, Marthandam, Tamil Nadu
Email: shimnadhas65@gmail.com

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Abstract— This paper explores the concept of gendered spaces in Arundhati Roy's "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness", focusing on the experiences of transgender individuals and the systemic gender discrimination prevalent in contemporary Indian society. Roy's depiction of spaces—both physical and metaphorical—reveals how gender constructs marginalise and alienate individuals, particularly those who exist outside traditional gender binaries. This article examines the intricate relationships between gender, space, and identity as reflected in Roy's narrative, offering critical insights into the struggles and resilience of marginalised communities.



Keywords— Gendered spaces, transgender identity, gender discrimination, marginalisation, Hijra community, Indian society.

I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of gendered spaces is fundamental to understanding societal structures and the ways they reinforce or challenge gender norms. Gendered spaces are physical or symbolic areas where particular genders are accepted while others are marginalized or excluded. In "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness", Arundhati Roy masterfully uses spaces—graves, cities, and even homes—to critique gender discrimination and highlight the lived experiences of transgender individuals in India.

Roy's protagonist, Anjum, a transgender woman born as Aftab, navigates these spaces, exposing the societal prejudices that ostracize individuals who deviate from traditional gender norms. Through Anjum's journey, Roy critiques the systemic exclusion embedded in urban and rural settings alike, examining how these spaces perpetuate gendered hierarchies.

II. TRANSGENDER IDENTITY AND THE QUEST FOR SPACE

Anjum's journey begins with her birth into a body that defies binary gender categorizations. As a Hijra, Anjum struggles with societal rejection and familial shame. Her mother's initial reaction—concealing her child's identity—reflects a pervasive cultural denial of transgender existence. Roy's description of Anjum's self-awareness—"Aftab had a body that blurred the lines between masculine and female" (Roy, 2017, p. 12)—illustrates the physical and psychological pain of existing in a society that demands conformity.

Anjum's move to the Khwabgah, a communal space for Hijras, symbolizes a temporary sanctuary where individuals like her can reclaim their identity. However, even within this space, there are limitations imposed by societal structures. Khwabgah's isolation from mainstream society underscores how marginalized communities often create their enclaves, both as a form of resistance and survival.

III. PUBLIC SPACES AS BATTLEGROUND

Roy's narrative emphasizes the tension between public and private spaces, particularly for transgender individuals. Anjum's experiences in public restrooms, marketplaces, and streets highlight the constant negotiation of identity and safety. Roy describes Anjum's interactions with others as fraught with ambiguity: "She who never knew which queue to stand in, which public toilet to enter..." (Roy, 2017, p. 122). This uncertainty reflects broader societal discomfort with those who defy gender norms.

Anjum's decision to inhabit a graveyard, turning it into a "Jannat Guest House," represents a radical reclamation of space. By transforming a site of death into a haven for marginalized individuals, Anjum subverts societal norms, creating a third space where traditional gender hierarchies hold no power. This transformation challenges the dichotomy of public versus private spaces, proposing instead a fluid, inclusive understanding of space.

IV. GENDER AND INTERSECTIONALITY

Roy's exploration of gender intersects with issues of caste, religion, and class, further complicating the experience of marginalized identities. Anjum's identity as a Muslim Hijra places her at the confluence of multiple discriminations, amplifying her struggles. The novel's depiction of caste-based discrimination—such as the treatment of Dalit women—parallels Anjum's experiences, drawing connections between different forms of systemic oppression.

By weaving these narratives together, Roy underscores the interconnectedness of social hierarchies. The exclusion of transgender individuals is part of a larger pattern of marginalization that affects all who deviate from societal norms. This intersectional approach deepens the reader's understanding of the structural forces at play.

V. CONCLUSION

In "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness", Arundhati Roy presents a poignant critique of gendered spaces and their role in perpetuating discrimination. Through Anjum's journey, Roy exposes the limitations imposed by societal norms while celebrating the resilience and creativity of marginalized communities in carving out spaces of their own. This analysis of gendered spaces invites readers to reconsider traditional constructs of gender and space, advocating for a more inclusive and equitable society.

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