

Beyond Binaries: Gender Fluidity and Identity in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses Arundhati Roy's complex portrayal of gender and identity in The Ministry of Utmost Happiness, concentrating specifically on the transgender experience represented by the character Anjum. It examines how Roy carefully develops Anjum's story, from her youth in a conservative Muslim family to her discovery of community and purpose within the Khwabgah, a refuge for transgender individuals. The analysis will explore the narrative strategies utilized to depict Anjum's inner conflicts and societal exclusion, emphasizing the intricacies of her emotional and physical transformations. Additionally, the paper investigates the ways in which the novel actively challenges traditional gender norms and binaries.

Keywords: conservative, community, transgender, narrative strategies, gender

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Arundhati Roy presents a powerful exploration of gender identity, belonging, and social exclusion through the life of Anjum, a Hijra whose journey forms the emotional core of the novel. Rather than portraying Anjum merely as a marginalized transgender character, Roy presents her as a complex individual whose life questions rigid ideas of gender, religion, and identity. Anjum's experiences reveal the conflict between the body and the self, the individual and society, and personal identity and cultural expectations. As Judith Butler argues, "gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed" (34). Roy's portrayal of Anjum reflects this idea by showing that gender is not fixed at birth but is continuously shaped through lived experience and social interaction. Through Anjum's life, the novel criticizes heteronormative structures and imagines alternative spaces where dignity, acceptance, and human connection become possible.

Anjum, who is born as Aftab in a conservative Muslim family in Old Delhi, experiences a deep conflict between biological sex and inner identity from childhood. Roy portrays Aftab's early life as one marked by confusion, silence, and emotional isolation. Although society expects Aftab to perform masculinity, the character gradually realizes an inner feminine identity that cannot be suppressed. This conflict illustrates Judith Butler's

argument that “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (25). Instead of accepting the gender assigned by society, Aftab slowly embraces the identity of Anjum, demonstrating that gender is a lived reality rather than a biological certainty. Roy therefore presents gender identity as an ongoing process of self-discovery rather than a fixed condition.

Jahanara Begum, Anjum’s mother, represents the tension between maternal love and social expectations. Although she loves her child, she struggles to accept Aftab's gender identity because of cultural and religious pressures. Her decision to conceal the truth reflects a society that often responds to gender difference with silence instead of understanding. This silence becomes another form of exclusion, forcing Anjum to search for acceptance elsewhere. Simone de Beauvoir’s famous observation that “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (283) helps explain Anjum’s transformation. Roy suggests that identity develops through experience, social relationships, and personal choice rather than through biological sex alone. Anjum’s transition is therefore presented not merely as a physical transformation but also as an emotional and psychological journey toward self-acceptance.

Anjum’s arrival at the Khwabgah marks the beginning of her true sense of belonging. The Khwabgah, meaning “House of Dreams,” functions as more than a physical shelter; it is an alternative social space where people rejected by mainstream society create their own family and identity. Hijras, intersex persons, and other gender-nonconforming individuals live together with dignity despite social discrimination. Roy does not portray them as helpless victims but as individuals capable of love, humour, celebration, and resilience. This representation reflects Judith Butler in *Undoing Gender* idea opines, “the critique of gender norms must be situated within the context of the lives as they are lived” (8). The Khwabgah therefore becomes a symbol of resistance, showing that marginalized communities can create meaningful lives outside dominant social structures.

Within the Khwabgah, gender is presented as flexible, performative, and socially constructed rather than biologically fixed. Anjum’s clothing, language, body, and everyday practices become expressions of her authentic identity instead of attempts to imitate womanhood. Roy's portrayal closely reflects Butler's concept of gender performativity, where identity is produced through repeated social actions rather than natural essence. At the same time, Roy integrates traditional Hijra customs such as blessings, ceremonies, and communal rituals into the wider cultural landscape of India, demonstrating that the Hijra community possesses its own history, traditions, and social significance. Through Anjum’s journey, *The*

Ministry of Utmost Happiness ultimately argues that identity cannot be confined within binary categories. Instead, Roy celebrates gender diversity as an essential part of human experience and challenges readers to reconsider conventional definitions of gender, belonging, and humanity.

Anjum's life undergoes a significant transformation after witnessing the violence of the Gujarat massacre. The traumatic experience forces her to leave the familiar world and seek refuge in a cemetery, where she gradually establishes the Jannat Guest House. The cemetery becomes a symbolic space that exists between life and death, exclusion and acceptance, allowing Roy to question the rigid boundaries imposed by society. Rather than presenting trauma only as suffering, Roy shows how it can become the beginning of rebuilding identity. This idea reflects Cathy Caruth's argument as, "trauma is always the story of a wound that cries out" (4). Anjum's decision to remain in the cemetery is therefore not an escape from society but a refusal to accept the social structures that once rejected her. Her survival itself becomes an act of resistance against violence and exclusion.

The Jannat Guest House represents Roy's vision of an inclusive community where marginalized people find dignity and belonging. It becomes a home for Hijras, Dalits, abandoned children, political dissidents, and even neglected animals, creating an alternative model of society based on compassion rather than hierarchy. Instead of defining family through blood relationships or social status, Roy presents family as a community formed through shared suffering and mutual care. Judith Butler in *Undoing Gender* observes that "we're undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something" (23). This idea explains the relationships within the Jannat Guest House, where care and emotional support replace traditional ideas of kinship. Ironically, Anjum, once rejected by society, becomes the nurturing centre of this unconventional family, demonstrating that belonging is created through empathy rather than social acceptance.

Roy further strengthens this idea through the novel's polyphonic narrative structure. The stories of Anjum, Tilo, Musa, Saddam Hussain, and others intersect without forming a single linear narrative. This fragmented structure reflects the fluid nature of identity itself. Instead of presenting identity as fixed or unified, Roy portrays it as constantly shaped by history, politics, gender, caste, and religion. Stuart Hall argues, "identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, we should think of identity as a 'production'"(222). Roy's narrative reflects this understanding by showing that Anjum's identity is continuously reconstructed

through changing experiences rather than determined by birth alone. The novel therefore rejects essentialist definitions of both gender and identity.

Gender identity in the novel cannot be separated from religious and political violence. As a Muslim Hijra, Anjum experiences multiple forms of marginalization that intersect with each other. Her survival during the Gujarat riots illustrates how religious identity and gender nonconformity make certain bodies especially vulnerable within systems of majoritarian nationalism. Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality explains that different forms of oppression operate together rather than separately (140). Roy demonstrates this through Anjum's experiences, showing that discrimination based on gender cannot be understood without considering religion, class, and political power. Yet Anjum refuses invisibility. Her continued existence becomes a political statement against a society that attempts to erase marginalized lives. Roy thus transforms Anjum's body into a site of both vulnerability and resistance.

Anjum's role as the emotional centre of the Jannat Guest House also redefines motherhood and family. Her adoption of Zainab challenges the widespread belief that motherhood belongs only to cisgender women. Through care, responsibility, and emotional commitment, Anjum reclaims a social role often denied to transgender individuals. Roy portrays motherhood not as a biological function but as an ethical practice based on compassion and responsibility. Similarly, characters such as Saddam Hussain and Miss Udaya Jabeen become part of a chosen family built on mutual trust rather than biological ties. These relationships demonstrate that trauma can create solidarity instead of isolation. Roy therefore expands the meaning of kinship by showing that families can be created through love, care, and shared experiences rather than inherited structures.

At the centre of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is Roy's powerful critique of the gender binary. Through Anjum's life as a Hijra, the novel questions the rigid distinction between male and female that dominates patriarchal society. Simone de Beauvoir's famous statement, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (283) provides an important theoretical framework for understanding Anjum's journey. Roy similarly suggests that gender is shaped through social experience rather than biological destiny. At the same time, the novel remains rooted in the Indian cultural tradition of the Hijra community, acknowledging both its historical significance and the violence faced by its members. Roy neither romanticizes nor victimizes the Hijra identity; instead, she presents it as a complex social reality that challenges binary understandings of gender while exposing the inequalities that continue to marginalize gender-diverse people.

The novel's title, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, is deeply ironic. Although it suggests an official promise of happiness, the narrative reveals that genuine happiness cannot be granted by institutions or political authority. Instead, Anjum creates her own space of hope through resistance, compassion, and community. Her life demonstrates that dignity is achieved not through conformity but through the courage to exist authentically despite social rejection. Roy ultimately presents Anjum as more than a victim of discrimination; she becomes a survivor, caregiver, and symbol of resilience. By challenging the categories of male and female, insider and outsider, normal and abnormal, Roy offers a powerful critique of exclusionary social systems while imagining a more inclusive vision of humanity. The novel therefore encourages readers to recognize gender diversity as an essential part of human existence and to imagine societies where every individual has the right to live with dignity, belonging, and what Roy calls the "utmost happiness."

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