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ALIGNING CONNOTATIONS OF LOST IDENTITIES IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S *THE MINISTRY OF UTMOST HAPPINESS*

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ABSTRACT

Gender inequality has attracted the attention of the world. It is no longer a national phenomena but has come out to be a global scenario. Arundhati Roy herself remarks "I don't believe that there are two genders. I see gender as a spectrum". Suddenly the world boundaries seem to melt as the third gender has suddenly come to the forefront with double marginalization and oppression at the hands of the society. For the society they are dead but for themselves they are alive. There is a poignant display of ruthless treatment at the hands of society yet they are made to dance in the weddings and show their supposed happiness. The world of Arundhati Roy is full of turbulence and violence as she has shown the Kashmir problem as well. The protagonists well as other characters are lost in their pursuit to gain consciousness. This research paper will delve in the untouched dimension of the transgender sexuality and sense of loss for self –identity. She has symbolized the third gender as an objective viewer to the turbulence happening around us.

Keywords: Gender Inequality, double marginalization, oppression, ruthless treatment, turbulence

The second novel of Arundhati Roy took twenty years in making and does not comply with her luxuriantly Faulkner-esque *God of Small Things*, tragedy. She has shown the extreme turbulence times by the means of a transgender character Anjum, who easily slips as dead in a living world. There is a strong sense of loss and despair as she lives with the dead in a 'khwabgah' or muslim cemetery. She feels secured, happy and comfortable in the city of dead as there is no one to trouble or torture her for being a transgender. In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, it's the living and the dead who sleep together, although only in the most literal sense of the word. There are no societal pressures or undue harassment for not being the usual sex.

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness seeks to articulate a postcolonial nation's history from the perspective of the marginalized. Anjum, a hijra, and Saddam Hussain, a Dalit, and Tilottama, a maverick young woman are the main characters in this sprawling narrative and their tales intertwine to capture the failure of the secular democratic nation state. Although Anjum's family history begins with the Partition and its impact on Muslims in Delhi, the prime historical focus of the novel is post-Emergency. Roy writes of Dalit lynchings, the pogrom against Sikhs in 1984, the rise of Hindu fundamentalism and the communal riots in Gujarat, the impact of the army occupation and jihadi movements on Kashmir, and the growth of resistance movements against the government. The novel, thus, raises questions about India's

democracy and the plight of minorities within this regime particularly in the last four decades.

When Anjum (born Aftab) meets Nimmo Gorakhpuri, another hijra, in the walled city of old Delhi, she tells him that the hijra home, the Khwabgah that Anjum wants to be a part of, is all “sham and fakery”. Nimmo continues,

No one's happy here... what are the things...normal people get unhappy about? ... Price-rise, children's school-admissions, husbands' beatings, wives' cheatings, Hindu-Muslim riots, Indo-Pak war--outside things settle down eventually. But for us the price-rise and school-admissions and beating-husbands and cheating-wives are all inside us. The war is inside us. Indo-Pak is inside us. It will never settle down. It can't.

What first drives Anjum out of the Khwabgah and into the graveyard is trauma. While making a pilgrimage to a Muslim shrine in North India, Anjum and a friend get caught up in the infamous Gujarat riots of 2002. Hindu nationalists, a rising force led by the state's chief minister, whipped up anti-Muslim fury to such a pitch that the violence lasted for three days and killed as many as 2,000 people. So terrible was Anjum's own experience during the riots (her friend did not survive) that she refuses to talk about it but instead renounces her hijra finery and adopts unisex clothes in drab, penitential colors.

In choosing a Dalit man, a Malayalee Christian woman, a Kashmiri man, and a hijra as her narrative focal points, Roy expands the idea of minoritization in India beyond the Partition binary of Hindu-Muslim/Indo Pak. Anjum's experience in the Gujarat riots and the Kashmir question can be directly tied to the Partition. The Ministry of Utmost Happiness also insists on recognizing caste, gender, and sexuality as complicating mainstream narratives of Hindu/Muslim, patriot/jihadi that permeate political discourses in the public sphere.

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness isn't knit together by the tight bonds of kinship. Longer and looser, it ranges across the past two decades of Indian history, taking in politics and several

momentous events. Probably this breaking of the ordinary sequential style of storytelling is another of Roy's willful transgressions, and possibly it's meant to suggest the cyclical nature of human cruelty and the exploitation and neglect of the poor by the rich.

In an interview with Decca Aitkenhead of *The Guardian*, Roy remarks that “To me there is nothing higher than fiction. Nothing. It is fundamentally who I am. I am a teller of stories. For me, that's the only way I can make sense of the world, with all the dance that it involves.” In that same interview, Roy also notes that “‘When people say this business of ‘she's the voice of the voiceless’, it makes me crazy,’ ... ‘I say, ‘There's no voiceless, there's only the deliberately silenced, you know, or the purposely unheard.’” (Aitkenhead 2017).

As a teller of stories, Roy loosely links three major storylines. The first is the story of Anjum, born Aftab, an intersexed child, who was raised male by her birth family but joins a community of hijras where her female identity is accepted. On a pilgrimage to Gujarat, Anjum and her traveling companion, an Imam, are caught up in the 2002 Godhra riots and Anjum survives because she is a hijra and people consider it inauspicious to kill a hijra. Traumatized by the experience and unable to care for her adopted daughter, Zainab, Anjum moves into an abandoned graveyard and gradually builds lodgings over the graves and assembles a rag tag bunch of people and animals who are all refugees from “Duniya,” the world outside the graveyard where heteronormativity, patriarchy, caste violence, pogroms, rape, and torture dominate. In Anjum's Jannat Guest House at the graveyard, the living and the dead commune and alternate kinship networks form that include people and animals.

The second narrative line is the story of Saddam Hussein, born Dayachand, a Dalit man, who had witnessed his father's lynching by caste Hindus and police because he was transporting a dead cow and was accused of having killed it. Traumatized by that violence, he adopts the name Saddam Hussein because he saw a viral video of the Iraqi dictator's execution in which the man faced his end with defiance. The Iraqi Saddam's final stance inspires

Dayachand who wants to avenge his father's death. Having befriended Anjum, he moves into the graveyard with his horse and becomes part of Anjum's tribe.

The third storyline focuses on S. Tillotama (Tilo), a Malayalee Christian architect from Kerala, a fictional representation of Arundhati Roy herself, who, as a college student, had had a deep friendship with three men all of whom had been in love with her. Her friend, Biplap Dasgupta nicknamed Garson Hobart in college, is an intelligence officer in Kashmir and the other two men, Naga and Musa, are a journalist and a Kashmiri nationalist respectively. Tilo's love affair with Musa draws her to Kashmir where the Indian army tortures Kashmiris seeking independence and labels them jihadis.

Musa has become a freedom fighter after his wife and daughter, Miss Jabeen, are killed by the Indian army while watching a funeral parade of Kashmiri martyrs. Tilo is detained by the occupying Indian army and is being interrogated by the notorious torturer Amrik Singh when she is rescued by Dasgupta and Naga. Tilo marries Naga to avoid the Indian government forces but eventually separates from Naga and becomes the keeper of Musa's secrets. Tilo's path crosses that of Anjum and Saddam at a massive protest rally at Jantar Mantar where numerous groups from Kashmiri mothers of the disappeared to Maoist fighters and Bhopal gas tragedy victims have gathered to protest corruption and seek redress for various injustices.

At this rally, an abandoned baby girl becomes the object of both Anjum and Tilo's interest and Tilo kidnaps the baby. Tilo's desire to ensure the baby's safety and Anjum's desire to raise her, brings Tilo into the Jannat Guest House graveyard community as well.

What links these three stories is the assemblage of the characters at the graveyard all of whom are invested in Miss Jabeen the Second, the foundling. That loose connection between the plots challenges the reader's sense of credibility, but it is clearly a plot device intended to show that the fates of Kashmiris, Dalits, Muslims, hijras, the poor, and Maoists are all linked to how the nation is

imagined and how that dominant national narrative sustains itself through repressing the marginalized. The marginalized are not just silenced but they are unheard and the protest at Jantar Mantar is a collective refusal to be silenced.

Jannat Guest House in the graveyard is an alternative national space in which all are welcome, there are no hierarchies, no birth and blood ties between people, and no rigid identity categories, no single religion, no violence, and no boundaries between the living and the dead. The stories of each of these people —Tilo, Saddam Hussein, Anjum— and that of the myriad other characters who put in cameo appearances such as Gul Kak, Azaad Bhartiya, Nimmo Gorakhpuri are those to which the novel bears witness. The novel, then, is an act of documenting these experiences. In drawing Tilo with broad brushstrokes of her own biography —one time architect, a Syrian Christian living in Delhi, and the daughter of a feminist who established a school for girls— Roy recognizes her social position as an upper-caste, upper class intellectual telling stories of the marginalized.

Tilo is a non-conformist and does not embrace mainstream notions of relationships, marriage, and motherhood. Had the Kashmir narrative been the sole focus of this novel, it would emerge as a romantic narrative of an unconventional woman and her three lovers who symbolize the different parties involved in shaping the Kashmir story —the Indian army, the journalist, and a freedom fighter.

However, the Kashmir question is framed as one of the many failures of the Indian state. Kashmir is the unresolved issue from Partition and decolonization that continues to structure not just India-Pakistan relations but also the relationship of the Indian state and army with the people of Kashmir. Additionally, as Roy writes of the 1990s and beyond in Kashmir's politics, she also recognizes the global dimensions of jihad through the story of Amrik Singh. Singh who was the torturer in chief pursuing Musa, Tilo's lover, and humiliating her in his cinema theater turned torture chamber, finds his way to the US and seeks asylum claiming to be a victim of torture and of ethnic violence as a Sikh.

The asylum officer buys into his story and the family lives in California where Amrik Singh works as a truck driver.

The Kashmiri freedom fighters led by Musa seek him out to avenge the many deaths of the innocent that he had caused. Eventually Singh and his family have a violent end perhaps brought about by Musa with his many passports and identity cards that facilitate his travel to the US. Roy ties the US war on terror to the politics of Kashmir emphasizing that the Kashmiri struggle is no longer a sub continental issue but a global one where the Indian occupation is bolstered by the American war on terror. Amrik Singh's manipulation of the Sikh experience of 1984 with his own intimate knowledge of torture in Kashmir to achieve asylum in the United States underscores that subaltern identities are not fixed. To be Sikh is to be both vulnerable to ethnic cleansing as in 1984 and also to be an agent of the Indian army perpetrating violence on others, particularly Kashmiri Muslims.

Amrik Singh's wife, who was a victim of domestic violence, convinces the asylum officer that her fears were from the political situation in Kashmir that put her life at risk. Her role in the asylum process marks both her position as active agent in rewriting the Kashmir narrative while simultaneously being victim of the chief torturer.

Through Tilo, Roy unpacks the many complex and often contradictory views promulgated about Kashmir and presents her character as a moral compass for the reader. Tilo documents what she sees in Kashmir, helps Azaad Bhartiya publish his newsletter about governmental atrocities, and befriends people irrespective of their caste, religion, class, or gender identity. In the alternative national space, the Jannat guest house, she becomes ustani (teacher) who equips young people with skills to continue the struggle. She is an ally of the different groups —Kashmiri freedom fighters, hijras, Dalits, Maoists— and has risked her own life in the pursuit of justice.

Through Tilo, Roy articulates the need for solidarity amongst different marginalized groups. By not tying up their stories in a novel that smoothes over inconsistencies and incongruities through slick

plot devices, she suggests that the genre must incorporate fable, magical realism, testimonials, reportage and abandon the compulsion to tell stories with beginnings, middles, and ends where all ends well and the world is a better place. Roy's narrative is also punctuated by self-conscious moments where different methods of truth telling and story -telling are explored.

Very early in the novel, Anjum is telling Zainab, her young daughter, a bedtime story based on her life. To the child, Anjum speaks of returning from a party with other hijras and walking over the Defence colony flyover and needing to urinate and not being able to stop to answer nature's call. To Zainab, the point of the story, was scatological humor and Anjum's conversation with a lady on a billboard advertising Bombay Dyeing bath towels. Anjum, the narrative notes, "began to rewire a simpler, happier life for herself" to please her daughter, and "the rewriting in turn began to make Anjum a simpler, happier person".

The reader learns that Anjum had edited out of her story the fact that this particular flyover story had occurred in 1976 at the height of the Emergency when Sanjay Gandhi and his Youth Congress terrorized ordinary people. Anjum and her hijra colleagues had gone to a wedding party when the police arrived, arrested the hosts, and beat up the hijras and their driver. The hijras ran over the flyover to save their lives and the Flyover story retained some elements of truth including that "Anjum really did piss while she ran. There really was an advertisement for Bombay Dyeing towels on the Defence Colony flyover".

Through this episode, Roy highlights that stories are intentionally changed in retelling sometimes because of the audience and at other times because the teller edits out traumatic and shameful moments to become a "happier person." We, the audience of this novel, then are called upon to ponder our role as audience of difficult stories and what it means for someone to express a traumatic event. The act of listening to these stories necessarily makes the teller relive the trauma and the act of bearing witness as listener then comes with the responsibility of recording it honestly and

retelling it to others responsibly. In a later episode, Kulsoom Bi, the Ustad of Anjum's hijra gharana, regularly takes her hijras to the Sound and Light show at the Red Fort.

The novel tells us that this was an old government-approved version of Indian history focused on emperors who had ruled the land for the two hundred years preceding British rule. Kulsoom was interested in the brief episode focused on Mohammad Shah Rangeela's rule and the year 1739. In the show, the invading armies of Nadir Shah approach Delhi and the unperturbed Emperor orders music to play on. Ustad Kulsoom Bi waited for the moment when the show focused on the zenana and amidst the tinkle of anklets.

suddenly, amidst the soft, happy, lady-sounds would come the clearly audible, deep, distinct, rasping coquettish giggle of a court eunuch.

For Kulsoom Bi, this was a moment of triumph because,

To be present in history, even as nothing more than a chuckle, was a universe away from being absent from it, from being written out of it altogether"

At the end of the novel, as the Hindutva government sweeps into power, the Sound and Light show at the Red Fort is subjected to revision and "Soon centuries of Muslim rule would be stripped of poetry, music and architecture and collapsed into the sound of the clash of swords and a bloodcurdling war cry that lasted only a little longer than the husky giggle that Ustad Kulsoom Bi had hung her hopes on. The remaining time would be taken up by the story of Hindu glory. As always, history would be a revelation of the future as much as it was a study of the past."

The tourist focused and government derived history of the Sound and Light show is an example of how the nation presents its history to its citizen tourists as well as to its foreign visitors. Early in the novel, the show becomes an example of how an elderly hijra seeks self representation, even a passing one, in such a show to validate her existence.

In the rewriting of the show by the Hindutva government not only does Roy demonstrate ideological appropriations of history but sets her own project in opposition to the dominant historical narrative embraced by the Hindutva regime. Not only is this novel a critique of Hindu fundamentalist hegemony, it also seeks to write history from the margins. Hijras are not just a passing, disembodied laughter but a strong narrative focal point. Muslims are represented not through the binary of patrons of high culture/marauding invaders but also as transgendered bodies.

Through Tilo Roy explores alternative ways of writing history:

"Tilo had been a weird, part-time stenographer to a full-time military occupation.

During her trips to Kashmir she had collected an assortment of photographs, story fragments, observations and they "appeared to have no purpose' She assembled an "archive of recoveries, not from a flood, but from another kind of disaster" that had become dangerous. One of her notebooks titled The Reader's Digest Book of English Grammar and Comprehension for Very Young Children comes back to her with Musa's papers.

Mimicking a children's textbook, the notebook contains various vignettes of bloodshed, violence, and oddities. From the death of innocent civilians to the conundrum of cattle crossing the Line of Control from India to Pakistan, these vignettes are followed by seemingly innocuous questions such as those found in textbooks for reading comprehension.

The notebook vignettes run several pages and interrupt the main story and the reader joins Tilo for a length of time reviewing her notebook. Tilo had grappled with how to tell the story of Kashmir and in the satire of the textbook genre, Roy critiques the educational system for covering up history because educational systems are geared to produce adults who subscribe to the nation's ideology. Unlike Anjum who had edited her story to make it tolerable to a young listener and to manage her own memories of the trauma, the state produces history

books to present only its version of the events. As with the Sound and Light show, these state versions.

Roy's project cannot be wholly represented by Anjum's approach to history nor to Tilo's gathering of scraps of information with no purpose and rendering them into a satirical and incomplete textbook for children. At the end of the novel, Tilo writes a poem she reads to Musa on his last visit to her at the Jannat guest house: How to tell a shattered story?

By slowly becoming everybody. No. By slowly becoming everything.

All the characters in the novel are fighting for their survival and trying to restore to their identity. Miss Udaya Jabeen, born of the gang rape of a Maoist activist, kidnapped by a woman who did want to be a mother, and raised by a hijra who passionately wanted to be one. Miss Udaya Jabeen, the foundling from Jantar Mantar, becomes another element in the narrative that brings the different plot lines together. The Jannat Guest house denizens learn about her history after a letter arrives for them through Azaad Bhartiya.

Her mother had been a Maoist fighting for land rights who had been gang raped by police. She named her baby, born of that rape, Udaya or "Dawn." Clearly, the baby is intended to be a symbol of the nascent alternative to the degenerating and fragmented postcolonial state. She is also named Miss Jabeen the Second by Tilo after Musa's young daughter who had died in her mother's arms when a stray bullet killed them both. Miss Jabeen had always demanded "Akh daleela wann" (Tell me a story) of her father, and he had engraved that rhyme on her gravestone. Udaya Jabeen represents that never-ending story of the next generation who will craft their own narratives of citizenship and belonging.

Roy has demonstrated her will to stand for people who are grappling with endless woes and are struggling to identify themselves. They are clueless whether they are alive or dead. The initial representation of loosely knit stories suddenly start making sense and the reader can identify the panoramic view of Arundhati Roy's world.

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