



TRANSGENDER PERSPECTIVE IN *'THE MINISTRY OF UTMOST HAPPINESS'*

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ABSTRACT

Gender study is one of the most prominent perspectives of the contemporary literature encompassing the issues of the women who have felt themselves marginalized and oppressed by the patriarchy. Women have made great advancement in terms of equality and freedom in the social and political sphere in present society. They do not have to face so much humiliation as a transgender is doomed to face - the third-gender doesn't belong to either 'he' or 'she' – the criteria of prominent categorization. The term 'third-gender' has been coined to give them an identity but in spite of all the efforts made by the authorities, they are still a neglected lot living in misery. This paper explores the quest for alternative identity and pursuit of happiness from the perspective of a transgender in Arundhati Roy's latest fictional venture 'The Ministry of Utmost Happiness'.

Key Words: Gender Studies, Transgender, Alternative Identity, Happiness.

INTRODUCTION

'The Ministry of Utmost Happiness' (2017) is the second fiction of the well-known Indian woman writer Arundhati Roy most famous for her Booker Prize winning masterpiece 'The God of Small Things' (1997). She has a number of non-fictions to her credit which are widely discussed the world over on social, literary and political platforms. She deals with the problems of the common man and goes to the extent of criticizing the system wherever she



finds it instrumental to the subjugation and marginalization of the deprived ones. She takes up not only regional and national but global issues in her work and doesn't hesitate to criticize the superpowers like America on the issues of neo-colonialism and corporate globalization. Among her prominent non-fictions are – 'The Algebra of Infinite Justice' (2001), 'An Ordinary Person's Guide to the Empire' (2005), 'The Shape of the Beast' (2008), 'Listening to the Grasshoppers :A Field Notes on Democracy' (2009) and 'Broken Republic' (2011).

Arundhati Roy has taken up the issue of the third gender along with other issues like militancy in Kashmir, the Naxal problem, displacement caused by dams, pollution and poverty in metropolitan cities, rampant corruption and communal politics in her second fiction 'The Ministry of Utmost Happiness'. The transgender community in India is traditionally looked down upon as 'Hijras' and their living condition is infested with isolation and deprivation:

“Transgender community is one of the most deprived and disempowered groups in the Indian society who are not treated as humans and left to pass as an isolated life.” (Sharma, 2018)

So a fiction by a world-renowned writer on this issue has been studied with different angles of criticism. It is a grand story of many stories that revolve around the central character, Anjum, a transgender. The story begins and ends with Anjum, the transgender; and the miseries of the world are brought to the fore with her perspective. She directly or indirectly contributes to each and every strain of the multiple levels of narratives and serves as a connecting link among all the important characters of the fiction.

The central character in the fiction, Anjum, escapes from the 'Duniya' to take shelter in a graveyard assuming that since there is no place in the 'Duniya' for her to belong to, she better create her own 'ministry of utmost happiness' subsuming all who need a solacing shelter and satisfaction amidst scarcity and poverty. The 'Jannat Guest House' is not only a soothing shelter for the 'hijras' hailing from different cultural and religious background but serves as an orphanage also for the abdicated children like Jainab and Miss Jebeen. Later on, it becomes a sheltering place for Tilottama, the psychologically suffering woman, and temporarily for Musa who becomes a militant when circumstances take an ugly turn. The amalgamation of so many distinct features and characters make Anjum declare herself a 'mehfil':

“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 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.” (4)



A pathetic tone, a sort of disorientation and an entire lack of belongingness can be observed when Anjum evades the question of the Imam visiting her at the graveyard:

“Tell me, you people, when you die, where do they bury you? Who bathes the body? Who says the prayers?” (5)

Anjum retorts in another question, ‘You tell me where the old birds go to die?’ She knows that there is no caste or religion for them to follow whose practices would spare any honour when the hijras die as they don’t belong to anywhere. There are no relatives to mourn and perform final rites and rituals (in fact, there is no mourning as their companions celebrate the death believing that the departed soul has got rid of a miserable life); they are just the amalgamation of castes, creeds and religions – there is only one similarity that unites them together and that is that they do not belong to the society that ‘exists’, rather they emphasize that they have no real existence:

“This place where we live, where we have made our home, is the place of falling people. Here there is no haqeeqat. Arre, even we aren’t real. We don’t really exist.” (84)

Not surprisingly, Anjum who feels that s/he(?) doesn’t belong to the ‘Duniya’ and there is no place better than the graveyard for her to live in. She takes shelter where her relatives are buried and where there is nobody to disturb her barring some corrupt municipal employees who can easily be handled with a little money and some non-vegetarian meals. There she has no reason to be afraid of either the ‘dead’ or the ‘living’ ones. Though she lives in penury and is limited only by her hand to mouth life, she feels pity for the men and animals that are rejected or dejected in the outer world and need a shelter. She offers shelter to all who need it irrespective of class, gender or religion and even makes bathing arrangements for the unclaimed bodies brought by people or police for cremation. She is in the pursuit of ‘happiness’ which is unlikely to be found in the ‘Duniya’ that is full of all indifference and cruelty for her. The grim situation, the harsh surroundings and the abject penury amidst which she lives is no exception to the grotesque condition of the life of a transgender in the ‘Duniya’. Here, there is hardly any difference between the ‘Khwabgah’ and the graveyard. This ‘run-down’ graveyard has been chosen deliberately by her as it is ‘used only occasionally’:

“It was an unprepossessing graveyard, run-down, not very big and used only occasionally. Its northern boundary abutted a government hospital and mortuary where the bodies of the city’s vagrants and unclaimed dead were warehoused until the police decided how to dispose of them.” (58)



Anjum has chosen to live amidst ‘unclaimed bodies waiting to be disposed of’, ‘smack addicts’ and ‘hospital waste in a sea of bandages and used syringes’, but it’s a pity that the ‘non-hijras’, ‘the homeless people’ who can’t exercise their choice in terms of residence - also stay there in the vicinity ‘cooking their meager, smoky meals’. Ms Roy has drawn attention of her readers on the plight of the homeless people comparing their miserable condition with that of the stray dogs who are ‘in better health than the humans’:

“The smack addicts at the northern end of the graveyard – shadows just a deeper shade of night - huddled on knolls of hospital waste in a sea of old bandages and used syringes, didn’t seem to notice her at all. On the southern side, clots of homeless people sat around fires cooking their meager, smoky meals. Stray dogs, in better health than the humans, sat at a polite distance, waiting politely for scrapes.” (61)

Aftab felt that he didn’t belong to the world in which he lived so he left his home to become Anjum in the ‘Khwabgah’ to belong to ‘somebody’ or ‘something’ in the pursuit of ‘happiness’ of his soul. In the ‘Khwabgah’, Anjum found that it was the place where ‘diverse’ people used to come for the fulfillment of their cherished dreams - never to be fulfilled any more. The ‘Khwabgah’ was a place just to live with unfulfilled dreams where she also learnt that ‘the Holy Souls’ within the Hijras were also a ‘diverse lot’ joining from different streams of life with different backgrounds and definitely with different mindsets and different interests. So the life in the ‘Khwabgah’ is also ‘diverse’ and ‘complicated’ though it is lesser than the ‘Duniya’ outside:

“Ustad Kulsoom Bi told her, because Hijras were chosen people, beloved of the Almighty. The word Hijra, she said, meant a Body in which a Holy Soul lives. In the next hour Anjum learned that the Holy Souls were a diverse lot and the world of the Khwabgah was just as complicated, if not more so, than the Duniya.” (27)

Anjum believes in lateral thinking, she doesn’t toe the line the other hijras traditionally follow and in spite of her misery, her creativity finds her own sources to find happiness in life. In spite of her search for ‘belongingness’, she is not dejected and dull all the time and tries to find happiness in the least possible pleasures of other tormented souls like Zainab, Saddam, Dr Azad Bhartiya, Tilo, Musa and Miss Jebeen. Her creativity, lateral thinking and choice of alternative living have been well delineated that earns critics’ appreciation:

“In her 2017 novel The Ministry of Utmost Happiness (henceforth TMOUH), she focuses on how those in the most precarious of social positions manage to



retain a toehold within the system by defiant creativity, lateral thinking and alternative living.” (Ana Cristina Mendes & Lisa Lau 2019)

People often come across the physical suffering of the third-gender but Ms Roy takes her readers to the depth of their endless psychological suffering that is hardly visible to the outer world. The turbulence, the struggle, the perennial unhappiness within the soul of a Hijra is unending because the issues of the outer world that make human happy or unhappy do not matter in their life. Everyone and everything that makes human happy or unhappy are subsumed within the soul of a Hijra and get neutralized – finally making them indifferent to happiness or unhappiness. They have no overt issues to deal with; rather they struggle and survive with the unending covert war ‘inside’ them:

“Who’s happy here? It’s all sham and fakery,’ Nimmo said laconically, not bothering to look up from the magazine. ‘No one’s happy here. It’s not possible. Arre yaar, think about it, what are the things you normal people get unhappy about? I don’t mean you, but grown-ups like you – what makes them unhappy? Price-rise, children’s school admissions, husband’s beatings, wives’ cheatings, Hindu-Muslim riots, Indo-Pak war – outside things that settle down eventually. But for us the price-rise and school admissions and beating-husbands and cheating-wives are all inside us. The riot is inside us. The war is inside us. Indo-Pak is inside us. It will never settle down. It can’t.”(23)

The transgender people usually earn their livings by asking for financial help, a sort of begging, in trains and other public places or by asking for ‘Inam’ to celebrate ‘Khusi’ on the occasion of marriage and child-birth in the society. This is their meager source of income that depends on the generosity of the people. Sometimes they resort to the display of obscenity, vulgar gestures and abusive language for extortion, what is termed as ‘*badtameezi*’ by Razia, and Nimmo Gorakhpuri’s tongue-in-cheek reply that they are ‘Happiness Hunters’ – the ‘*Khusi-khor*’- denizens of the ‘other world’ doomed to earn their livings this way depending on the generosity and ‘Khusi’ of the common people:

“This is what Razia meant when she said badtameezi, and what Nimmo Gorakhpuri referred to when she said, “We’re jackals who feed off other people’s happiness, ‘we’re Happiness Hunters.’ Khusi-khor was the phrase she used.” (24)

The treatment meted out to the transgender in our society is very depressing. They are constantly subjected to mockery, humiliation and sometimes to torture. There are very limited opportunities for them to lead a comfortable life in spite of the efforts by the government.



Their humiliation is almost a routine as is found in the description of their ill-treatment while returning home from a wedding-party after the assassination of Mrs Gandhi:

“His passengers were dragged out of the Matador, kicked on their backsides as though they were circus clowns and instructed to scam, to run all the way to home if they did not want to be arrested for prostitution and obscenity. True, it was only a routine bit of humiliation for Hijras, nothing out of the ordinary, and nothing at all compared to the tribulations others endured during those horrible months.” (35)

Another instance of the ill-treatment is that which Anjum has to face during Gujarat riots after the Godhra incident where her old companion is brutally killed by the mob in spite of her attempts to save him. The mob is about to kill her but her life is saved as someone in the mob opines that killing a Hijra is a bad omen, an ‘apshakun’. She is abused and humiliated for being a ‘hijra’ and even more for being a ‘Muslim Hijra’. Before this incident she had the belief that since the hijras don’t belong to anywhere, they cannot be discriminated on the basis of caste or religion at least as it often happens with other belonging ones. But in its killing spree, the mob addresses her as a ‘Muslim Hijra’ and humiliates her more – that makes her more dejected. It’s a paradox that seeking blessings of a hijra on the occasion of marriage, child-birth or other happy occasions is a good omen - a ‘shakun’; but killing them is an ‘apshakun’ - abusing and humiliating them is not. She narrowly escapes being killed, only because it is believed that it would bring bad luck to the killers but she had to undergo a lot of humiliation:

“Ai Hai! Saali Randi Hijra! Sister-fucking Whore Hijra. Sister-fucking Muslim Whore Hijra. Another voice rose, high and anxious, another bird: Nahi yaar, mat maro. Hijron ka maarna apshakun hota hai.” (62)

So, in the fictional world of Arundhati Roy, the pursuit of happiness for a Hijra never ends – be it the outside world, the ‘Duniya’; or the ‘Khwabgah’ where diverse hijras may enjoy dreams that never come true or even the ‘Jannat Guest House’, the graveyard, that is the ultimate end of life. The whole world is a ‘Khwabgah’ for the transgender where they have to survive with the never ending pursuit of happiness – where the Holy Souls trapped in the wrong bodies wait to be liberated:

“The Khawbgah was called Khwabgah, Ustad Kulsoom Bi said, 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.” (53)



Culturally, gender is also an identity construct in which there is either ‘he’ or ‘she’- signifiers in our language but the ‘she’ usually applied for the transgender is a misnomer, it ends up in ‘gender confusion’. The transgender people like Anjum do not belong to either of them, so when it is found that Aftab is born with some features of both a male and a female – a ‘Hermaphrodite’, his mother is very much concerned and tries to hide the features from the world – even from his own father. Her concern finds apt expression here:

“Was it possible to live outside language? Naturally this question did not address itself to her in words, or as a single lucid sentence. It addressed itself to her as a soundless, embryonic howl.” (8)

The educational backwardness of the third gender is explicit in the commonly-practiced foul language used by Anjum and other hijras. The gestures, body language and the natural flow of obscenity in language – the hallmark of a Hijra – are the predominant features in the characterization of Anjum and her companions. It shows their poor socio-cultural status on one hand and on the other displays a quest for identity and a search for belongingness somewhere:

“She learned to exaggerate the swing in her hips when she walked and to communicate with the signature spread-fingured Hijra clap that went off like a gunshot and could mean anything –Yes, No, Maybe, Wah! Behen ka Lauda (Your sister’s cock), Bhonsdi ke (You arshole born). Only other Hijras could decode what was specifically meant by the specific clap at the specific moment.” (27)

Arundhati Roy has made a detailed study of the miserable life of the transgender and has made Anjum the central character around which all other characters and all other stories revolve. She has pointed to the corruption prevailing in the society where even the poor hijras have to bribe the municipal authorities to let them live in the graveyard. She has referred to the administrative system full of scams: the issues of environmental pollution, displacement due to dams, communal politics of the nation, ill-treatment meted out to the dalits and militancy in Kashmir – but the story begins with Anjum and ends with her. Everybody has his/her own struggle in which one is doomed to survive in the pursuit of happiness and there is no escape even in the graveyard, still the ‘emerging precariat’ in the novel showcases ‘the greatest will and ability to reject the system, not seeking to escape precarity by falling in line’:

“The emergent precariat in Roy’s novel is presented as a possible model for a new leading force in radical politics, showcasing how it is primarily the manifold Othered (women, children, transsexuals, outsiders, and the



marginalized) who show the greatest will and ability to reject the system, not seeking to escape precarity by falling in line and climbing the ladder to (projected and desired) social safety, but instead by substituting one set of precarities with a different set of belongings and relationships vital to life.”(Ana Cristina Mendes & Lisa Lau 2019)

The grief and torments - inside and outside - psychological and physical - are always prevalent in the life of the transgender. Though they do not belong to the ‘Duniya’, they observe the filth of the world, and the suffering of the ‘others’, trying to mitigate them through courageous acceptance of their fate and in their quest for happiness. The lives of the transgender are beautifully weaved into the many lives existing along with the prosperity of the age old city. The narratives of the personal and the national have been merged in Roy’s fictional world where the Transgender find their voice and the avowed support of its author in her realistic and derisive depiction of Delhi which is reflected in the ‘puddle of the pee’ Miss Udaya Jebeen makes at the end of the fiction:

“When Miss Udaya Jebeen said, ‘Mummy, soo-soo!’ Anjum sat her down under a street light. With her eyes fixed on her mother she peed, and then lifted her bottom to marvel at the night sky and the stars and the one-thousand-year-old city reflected in the puddle she had made.” (438)

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