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## Gender Discrimination, Identity Crisis and Social Stratification In the *The Ministry Of Utmost Happiness* By Arundhati Roy

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### Abstract

**Aims:** *This paper aims to study the power hierarchy, social discrimination and sexual identity through the lens of the contemporary society. Arundhati Roy won the Man Booker Prize in 1997 for her debut novel *The God of Small Things*. This novel in question, 'The Ministry of Utmost Happiness' is a symbolical masterpiece and dives deep into the human psychology and the changing dynamics of gender-roles.*

**Methodology and Approaches:** *The study attempts to discuss in a comprehensive manner some prominent issues including corruption, sexual indifference, social in-acceptance, power and politics, capitalism, class and caste distinction that are discussed through the lives of the characters and dealt with the magnifying lens of human psychology.*

**Outcome:** *The paper reflects on how Arundhati Roy writes to demand attention and action regarding the injustice and inequality prevalent across society. She wishes to create a more sustainable world, a world that accepts people irrespective of the difference in their appearance or opinions; a better, safer and a more peaceful society to live in.*

**Conclusions:** *This paper highlights the struggles and challenges of the rigid caste system prevailing in the country. The writer talks about justice for humans and animals alike. It's not in the literal sense of the term "happy novel" but every character is given a ray of hope and how they prove their unwavering strength amid times of distress and tragedy.*

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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 not 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 (Roy 4).

Anjum is the central protagonist of the novel who paves her own way in the world that wouldn't even allow her the freedom to be herself. They saw her as 'Aftab' but hiding behind the curtain, the shy Anjum decided it was her life that was solely to be chosen by her even if that meant giving up on her family. She lived in a highly sexist society that only magnified humans through the lens of gender binary.

Aftab is presented as a masculine child when he is young but the thing that makes him exceptional is the fact that he had a melodious voice. Aftab's father wanted him to be inclined towards masculinity, and therefore, told him stories of warriors and heroes but deep within Aftab knew that he was more interested in knowing about feminine beauty and the role of women in wars. Eventually, he developed admiration towards femininity and ended up at the Khwabgah. His decision to move there permanently devastated his parents. Aftab eventually transformed himself into Anjum after having a sex change surgery. From this point on Anjum felt complete. She finally was at peace with her own identity. She goes on to become a successful transgender and fights for human rights. She becomes a woman of substance and her character has gravity and aggression to assert her point:

Is it possible for a mother to be terrified of her own baby? Jahanara Begum was. Her first reaction was to feel her heart constrict and her bones turn to ash...her fourth reaction was to contemplate killing herself and her child...Everything was either masculine or feminine, man or woman. Everything except her baby. Yes of course she knew there was a word for those like him- Hijra. Two words actually, Hijra and Kinnar. But two words do not make a language. (Roy 8)

Eventually, one day, Anjum finds a baby abandoned outside a mosque and she decides to nurture the baby naming her Zainab. Even though she deeply loves, cares and adores the baby, she is clueless as to how to parent her. Instead, she goes on to tell terrifying stories from her own life to the child, thereby spoiling her. Anjum later takes a pilgrimage with Zakir Mian to a holy Muslim place in Gujarat. While there, Anjum and Zakir are caught in a massacre which claims the life of Zakir Mian. Anjum is spared because killing Hijras are considered to be bad luck. The violence transforms Anjum and she decides to dress up Zainab as a boy against her wishes (paradoxically, contradicting her parents who wanted her to have masculine qualities against her wish) to prevent her from facing the dangers of the society:

Always remember-we are not just any Hijras from any place. We are the Hijras of Shahjahanabad. Our Rulers trusted us enough to put their wives and mothers in our care. Once we roamed freely in their private quarters, the zenana, of the Red Fort. They're all gone now, those mighty emperors and their queens. But we are still here. Think about that and ask yourselves why that should be. (Roy 49)

She stops trusting people around her. Anjum decides to leave Khwabgah and starts living in a graveyard, illegally encroaching it. With Saddam Hussein and Imam Ziauddin's assistance, she converts her place into a guest house for people who were rejected from other places and started offering funeral services for the graveyard. Later in the story, we see Saddam's revelation where he claims to belong to a lower class. And tells the story of how his father was lynched by a mob because he was suspected of killing a cow.

Anjum goes to a protest march near Jantar Mantar and there she finds a baby. The baby is taken by S. Tillottama. Meanwhile, Biplab Dasgupta, has given his flat for rent to Tilo. He was apparently also in love with her during his college years, when Naga and Musa worked in the dramatics club. He is Tilo's college friend and is baffled about Tilo's disappearance, "there were rumours that might have been true, and truths that ought to have been just rumours." (Roy 312)

We also see during the later chapters that Naga has become a journalist with leftist inclination while Biplab was working in foreign services. Both of them were posted in Kashmir during 1996, and that was the time when Biplab receives a call that Tilo was arrested along with a dangerous terrorist Musa. Biplab sends Naga to investigate the matter and finds out that both of them are now married.

Fourteen years pass by when Tilo comes searching for a place to live, Biplab goes through her stuff to find out the details about her disappearance. He finds photos of people who were tortured during the insurgency and also finds a couple of files on the officer who had interrogated her and was also the one who killed Musa. Naga is obsessed with Tilo, but then he eventually chooses to move on. We also find out that the officer who killed, Musa, committed suicide.

Later on, it was revealed that Musa's daughter and his wife were killed in army gunfire and that led him to become so brutal and cruel that he became a terrorist. Tilo marries Naga, to avoid being suspected. She soon discovers that she is pregnant with Musa's child, but chooses to abort it because she was not ready to be a mother.

Zainab and Saddam get married. While funeral proceedings were held for Saddam's father, Tilo's mother and the orphan's mother who also turns out to be a communist rape victim who had left the child (born out of her rape) to survive, fight and die for her movement. This shows how a woman with a sense of autonomy can also pass on the sense of independence, freedom, bravery and fearlessness to the future generations. She wanted the child to continue the fight irrespective of the consequences. All that she was looking for was justice and recognition specially to convey to the society that she needed to be heard.

I would like to attend the funeral,' Tilo said to Khadija. 'We could. But it will be a risk. We may get late. And we won't get anywhere close. Women are not allowed near the grave. We can visit it afterwards, once everyone has left.' Women are not allowed. Women are not allowed. Women are not allowed. Was it to protect the grave from the women or the women from the grave? (Roy 387)

Musa eventually collects Tilo's stuff from Biplab and the two men get involved in a discussion on Kashmir's future. Musa meets Tilo for one last time and we see him die in a confrontation later in the story. All the inhabitants who settled in the graveyard guest house eventually find their own ray of hope and a beckoning light of happiness, even after when they are evicted from the world.

We see that the central protagonist Anjum has a constant feeling that she's being subordinated and subdued by the society which had difficulty in comprehending her alternate sexual identity. This is the time when she was dealing with the conflict in the society, her own identity crisis, and the conflict within her mind. It took her some time, but she eventually realised who she was, and who she wanted to be. It was then life came full circle for Anjum when she realised that it was she and only she was going to dictate her life's choices and decisions. The novel explicitly talks about gender, inequality and social discrimination where people are treated as inferior or superior based on their class, community, gender and religion. The themes seem to be interconnected whilst being a unified symbol to denote how there are human clashes, not in terms of your physical identity but the distinction and emotional gap of mental identities. Arundhati Roy also goes on to point out that the human mind no matter how hard it tries cannot always find one fixed linear solution to every problem even if one tries to dwell deep into the roots of the problem, but a person can always find their own happiness if they have a clarity on their own purpose of life and a sense of accepting things they can't change. All the characters in the book, Anjum, Tilo, Musa wish to find a place where they are accepted and considered 'normal.' They want to be in a place where they are not being dictated by conventional norms or stereotypes and most importantly, beyond any identity, they just needed to be considered human. One is completely drained and hopeless if one is devoid of love for a longer period of time.

The book fundamentally questions the standards of happiness, and who actually decides the rules of being happy? Anjum refers to the world as 'Duniya' that gives place only to the 'normal'. The only place that gives them shelter in the big, bad world is Jannat Guest house, which, truly justifies the name since it was

located in the graveyard. The main characters are upset both with the external and internal systems of human society. We can also find glimpses of Roy's opinion and perspective on the state politics that uses religion and community as an agenda.

The characters are a reflection of the mind of the writer and dives deep into the imagination of Arundhati Roy. She is the woman who rebels at first simply to see if anyone would react and then she rebels more because she knows that she has a voice that she can make the world hear. The book is an intimate journey of many significant years across the Indian subcontinent where war equals peace and peace equals war. It is also a heartbreaking love story and the remonstrance which is narrated in whispers. There are ample instances where the reader finds themselves tearful, which though unsentimental completely touches the chords of the heart. There are also times when the writer makes us laugh, but those laughs are bitter and sarcastic, as if hinting at the burning issues around us. All her heroes are broken by the world, but their desire and dedication towards themselves and towards the vision and purpose of their own lives patch the spaces of their heart simply through love and hope.

The writer also pinpoints the fact that politics overrules humanity and it is a serious matter to be looked into. She indicates many ways in which various segments of the Indian society has been subjugated and oppressed by the political leaders after the 1947 partition between India and Pakistan. There is a constant power struggle, corruption, political violence, and capitalism- the themes of which are prevalent throughout the novel. Perseverance and resilience keep the spark between the characters alive and weave them in a common thread of acceptance throughout the work. We find enough instances of inequalities and violence through the point of view of characters and scenarios where in order to survive one must have the will and hope to never give up.

The novel also highlights the fact that social hierarchy privileges the upper strata of the society and the lower strata is often oppressed and marginalized and continue to fight for equality and equity. People belonging to the upper class and upper caste or a certain religious background are benefitted while the others are



looked down upon. Even in the chapters which dealt with the fight between the Kashmiri locals and militants, we see that each group claims to have a moral purpose behind their actions but on deeper introspection, their actions are solely motivated through selfish gains and monetary benefits, much contrary to the alleged beliefs. It also highlights how capitalism undermines the model intentions of the groups that are in question.

The story of Miss Udaya Jebeen- the baby who was adopted by Anjum and Tilo signifies and epitomises the importance of hope. The story of this baby is important because the writer ends the narrative on this note. Roy points out that strength and persistence will always bring peace and calmness to the human mind. There is underlying psychological trauma and intense emotional complexities in the minds of the characters. The only thing that keeps them alive is the fact that the thread of hope binds them in a world that is divided in all segments.

Beyond the veil of stereotyping and prejudice lies the human heart. The guest house in the graveyard denotes that no matter how much we fight for politics, sexuality, money, community or religion, the life of every living being on this planet would lead to the graveyard. So, in order to keep the spirit alive, we must either fight for a cause or fight to ruin the peace in the world.

How to tell a shattered story?

By slowly becoming everybody.

No.

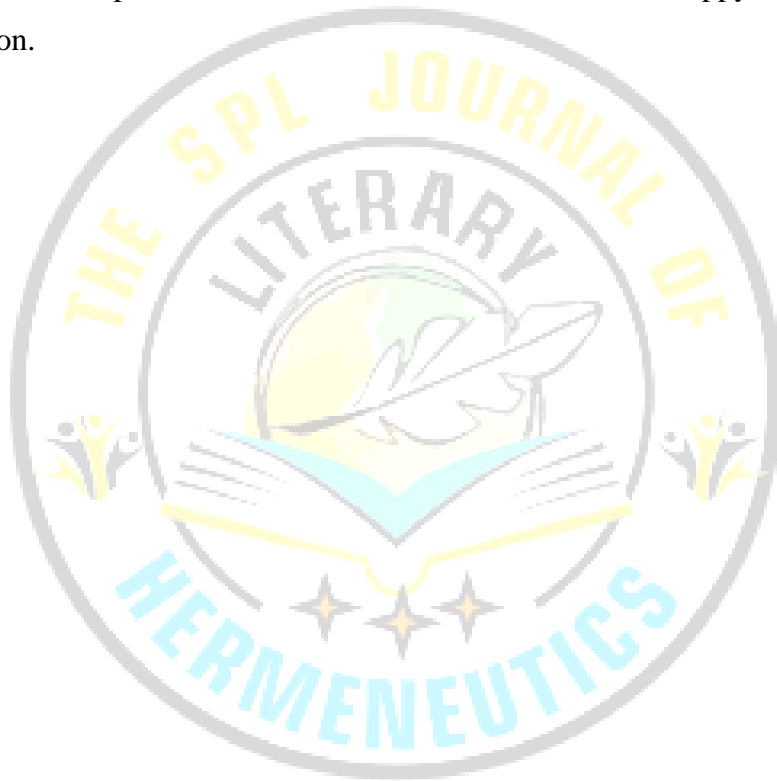
By slowly becoming everything.' (Roy, 436)

There is a first and third person narrative used throughout the novel through which the writer brings the characters to life. The novel brings out the core human experiences and emotions. Arundhati Roy points out in her address to the audience at the Sharjah International Book Fair, "I have never been particularly ambitious. I am not a careerist, I am not trying to get anywhere in a career. It is more important to engage with society, to live it, to have difference experiences." The novel covers various broken fragments of life through history, myths, riots, sexuality through the lens of the contemporary society. The fascinating and ironic fact in the novel is that the story begins and ends in the graveyard and everything

else comes in between. The description of the nature and environment also plays a pivotal role in assessing the minds of the characters:

By the time they got back, the lights were all out and everybody was asleep. Everybody that is, except for Guih Kyom the dung beetle. He was wide awake and on duty, lying on his back with his legs in the air to save the world in case the heavens fell. But even he knew that things would turn all right in the end. They would, because they had to. Because Miss Jebeen, Miss Udaya Jebeen, was come. (Roy 438)

The novel is left open-ended for the readers to reach their own happy and hopeful conclusion.





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