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**Where Margins Intersect: A Study of Arundhati Roy's
*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness***

Arundhati Roy exhibits amazing ingenuity in crafting a literary dais for the people who exist on the fringes of the Indian society. After the remarkable success of her debut novel *The God of Small Things* (1997), Roy continued writing non-fictional works that were quite provocative and radical in nature. She often contemplates on the issues of national importance. She is a novelist, a feminist, a literary activist and an ardent environmentalist. Some of her non-fictional works include *The End of Imagination* (1998), *The Cost of Living* (1999), *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* (2002), *Public Power in the Age of Empire* (2004), *Listening to Grasshoppers: Field Notes on Democracy* (2010), and *Kashmir: The Case for Freedom* (2011).

Her recent novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), enthralls the global readership with its epic-like scope, a wide spectrum of characters and a fascinating narrative with interwoven stories. This novel encapsulates the rapidly transforming face of Indian democracy with the rise of Right-wing political ideology, the degenerating condition of the marginalized groups of people, the atrocities that are rampant in Kashmir valley and the environmental hazards that have surfaced due to rapidly evolving urbanization.

This paper delves into a judicious study of the process of marginalization by analyzing Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. It aims to explore the way in which Roy makes an artistic effort to connect the margins with the mainstream in order to restore the lost grandeur of Indian societal structure.

Keywords: Marginalization, Transgender, Dalit, Intersect, Forbidden, Self-destruct

“There’s really no such thing as the ‘voiceless’.

There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard.”

— Arundhati Roy

The population that exists at the periphery of the society or at the marginal realm is categorized as the marginalized population. This population is excluded from mainstream and confined to the margins in ways that are inexplicable. The people who belong to this category are often alienated from community life with limited means of survival and opportunities at hand. Their lives are loaded with frustration and confusion because the society they belong to refuses to rehabilitate them and allow them to fetch normality into their lives. Those who belong to the mainstream, on the contrary, are in a state of, “. . . never-stopping and constantly dazzling spectacle of the city. . .” (Bauman 89). They have better and much entertaining things to look forward to and as Bauman further asserts, “The bigger and more heterogeneous a city, the more attractions it may support and offer . . . (89). Thus the abyss between the centre and the margins is perpetually widening. If the condition of the marginalized groups in India is not speedily improved the societal structure is bound to collapse.

Literary activists are drawing the attention of the people living in the mainstream towards the issues of the marginalized. By means of public awareness the process of nation-building can be fuelled and the marginal realm can be merged with the mainstream. Arundhati Roy studies the issue of marginality with finesse. She tries to overcome the division between the centre and the periphery by using her artistic sensibility. She fills the literary vacuum by giving democracy of expression to the marginalized characters in her novel. The traditional Japanese art of repairing or binding broken pieces by using gold dust commonly known as Kintsugi is similar to Roy’s literary effort of bringing or binding the broken pieces of our society together. Kintsugi is a

method of repair that “. . . celebrates each artifact’s unique history by emphasizing its fractures and breaks instead of hiding or disguising them. Kintsugi often makes the repaired piece even more beautiful than the original, revitalizing it with new life” (n. pag.). In a similar way Roy and a host of other Indian writers in English are zealously trying to repair the dilapidated societal structure by binding the broken fragments and reintegrating the margins with the mainstream. However, instead of gold dust they intend to use their literary proficiency in regaining the trust of the marginalized people.

Arundhati Roy’s second novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), has taken the world by storm. This novel, like her first novel *The God of Small Things* (1997), is an immensely great contribution to the corpus of Indian English Literature. Her debut novel had won the Man Booker Prize for Fiction in 1997. In 2004, she was awarded the Sydney Peace Prize and the prestigious Norman Mailer Prize in 2011. She is an ardent literary activist who has authored a number of non-fictional works that focus on issues of national importance such as casteism in India, the pathetic condition of the marginalized sections of society, rampant urbanization, consumerism and loss of natural resources, perpetual bloodshed in Kashmir, and dismal political atmosphere in the country. Her renowned non-fictional works include *The End of Imagination* (1998), *The Cost of Living* (1999), *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* (2002), *Public Power in the Age of Empire* (2004) *Listening to Grasshoppers: Field Notes on Democracy* (2010), and *Kashmir: The Case for Freedom* (2011). As an Indian author Roy diligently upholds the ideals of democracy by means of her literary genius. Her version of reality is neither sugar-coated nor camouflaged by the power dynamics in India. Her writings are thoughtful, independent, factual, unbending and often uncensored. Her fiction is not synonymous with reportage because of the emotive use of words. The structure of her narrative has a frame story with an interwoven mesh

of consequent stories told with artistic maturity. The narrative progresses against a backdrop of unstable political scenario with strong undercurrents of change. In such a scenario the democratic nature of Indian constitution is being perpetually threatened by various Right-wing political ideologists.

In this novel the mainstream is referred to as *duniya* (world). For Anjum, a transwoman from the walled city of Shahjahanabad, in old Delhi, the word *duniya* refers to the outside world where people with identity and gender exist. This outside world has no place for people like Anjum who belongs to the category of the third gender, commonly known in India as hijra. She was named Aftab by her mother Jahanara Begum and her father Hakim Mulaqat Ali. They had expected a son but the birth of a hermaphrodite bewildered Jahanara Begum. She concealed her child's gender from her husband for a long time and secretly lamented over the fact that her child did not have a gender. Children teased Aftab for his effeminate mannerisms and his father was also antagonistic towards him. The narrator describes the dilemma of Aftab's mother:

In Urdu, the only language she knew, all things, not just living things but *all* things – carpets, clothes, books, pens, musical instruments – had a gender. 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.

(TMUH 8)

As a child Aftab was fascinated by the charm and vibrancy of a hijra called Bombay Silk, whom Aftab had followed till he reached the gates of the Khwabgah. Khwabgah gave shelter to a diverse community of transgenders. This was a sanctuary for the battered and the deprived people who were ostracized by the society outside the Khwabgah. Aftab escaped from his

paternal house to the Khwabgah – the House of Dreams, when the outside world seemed intolerable. Aftab could not tolerate the biological changes that were taking place in his body, “His body had suddenly begun to wage war on him” (23-24). His life transformed as he entered the threshold of Khwabgah and changed his name from Aftab to Anjum. He was welcomed by the head of the house called Kulsoom Bi. She believed that, “Ordinary people in the Duniya – what did they know about what it takes to live the life of a Hijra? What did they know about the rules, the discipline and the sacrifices? . . . That they had built themselves up, bit by bit, humiliation by humiliation. . .” (53). She reigned supreme over the residence of the Khwabgah and showed great affection for Anjum. Kulsoom Bi suggested Anjum to undergo a sex reassignment surgery (SRS) that would enable her to confront the gender dysphoria that aggrieved her. Anjum was operated by doctor Mukhtar who agreed to, “. . . remove her male parts and try to enhance her existing vagina. He also suggested pills that would un-deepen her voice and help her develop breasts” (28). For more than three decades she lived in the Khwabgah with, “. . . patched-together body and her partially realized dreams” (29).

Anjum’s narrative takes a sharp turn when she decides to leave the Khwabgah with Zainab, her adopted daughter. Her decision appalled the residents of Khwabgah because she had no place to go to, “Now she wanted to return to the Duniya and live like an ordinary person. . . . The question was, were ambitions such as these, on the part of someone like herself, reasonable or unreasonable?” (29-30). Life within the walls of Khwabgah provided Anjum with a sense of security and companionship. The inhabitants recognized, empathized and consoled each other and lived like a huge family. The life outside Khwabgah was ruthless and far more challenging for the people who had been deliberately pushed to the periphery of the society. The narrator raises rhetorical queries related to Anjum’s decision so as to arouse the lobotomized psyche of a

majority of people who are still unaware of the problems of the marginalized groups. Duniya of the ordinary people is unprepared to welcome anyone coming from the margins. Anjum witnessed a fanatic communal outburst while she was on a trip to Gujarat with Zakir Mian. He succumbed to injuries by an outrageous mob, while Anjum was forgiven and allowed to live on account of being a Hijra (transgender), the killing of whom fetched misfortune. Her personality was shaken to the core as a result of this horrific incident that made her, “restless and edgy” (56). As the narrator remarked, “. . . it coursed through her veins like an insidious uprising, a mad insurrection against a lifetime of spurious happiness she felt she had been sentenced to” (56-57). Anjum abandoned the Khwabgah to enter the outside duniya (world) without Zainab.

The novel opens with words that describe Anjum after her migration from Khwabgah to the graveyard, “She lived in the graveyard like a tree” (1). She observed the movement of the crows at dawn and of the bats at dusk. The people around the graveyard ridiculed and mocked her way of living. Many insulted her with cruel remarks like, “. . . clown without a circus, queen without a palace. . . ” (1). She was frequently visited by imam Ziauddin of Fatehpuri Masjid, who was a visually challenged man. The title of the opening chapter that reads, “Where do old birds go to die?” (1), points towards the fact that old birds like old people are often discarded by the society. They are left alone to die. Such people are often dumped like garbage, away from the world of entertainment, ecstasy and youth. Anjum, as described by the narrator is an individual who desires to create her own sanctuary before dying. At one point in the narrative Anjum asserts, “I’m not Anjum, I’m Anjuman. I’m a *mehfil*, I’m a gathering. Of everybody and nobody, of everything and nothing” (4). She is a gathering of sentiments and spontaneity but her vibrancy has been overshadowed by the corrupt and communal atmosphere around her. However, Anjum begins to connect with the duniya around her and the margin begins to drift towards the

mainstream at this juncture. She had frequent visitors, she began to groom herself and constructed a shelter that was later named as the Jannat Guest House. The discarded, abandoned and lonely were always given a warm welcome at the guest house. This earthly paradise as the name Jannat suggests provided both human beings and animals with equal amount of safety and affection.

As the narrative progresses the appearance of the character called Saddam Hussain grips the attention of the reader. He is portrayed as a young boy who initially serves at a mortuary. Due to adverse circumstances he abandons that job and begins to work at various other places. The security guard service called Safe n' Sound Guard Service (SSGS), exploited Saddam and later sacked him without giving any appropriate reason. He took shelter in the Jannat guest house and in collaboration with Anjum launched the Jannat Funeral Services. However, as the narrator remarks, "The one clear criterion was that Jannat Funeral Services would only bury those whom the graveyards and imams of the Duniya had rejected" (80). This philanthropic service upheld the ideal of humanity even amidst horrendous atrocities. Saddam and Anjum's comradeship was based on mutual respect and affection. Anjum philosophized while talking to Saddam, "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). This place of falling people is ironically a place that uplifts people and protects them. This is a place where the language of equality is actually spoken, unlike the kind of intolerance that Anjum and her accomplices faced during their visit to the Jantar Mantar when Mr. Aggarwal had arrogantly asked, "Who gave these Hijras permission to sit here? Which of these Struggles do they belong to?" (119). Innumerable people assembled at Jantar Mantar to raise their voices against injustice and corruption but none understood the trauma of being a transgender.

Later in the novel Saddam confessed before Anjum that his real name was Dayachand, and that, “He was born into a family of Chamars–skinners– in a village called Badshahpur in the state of Haryana” (85-86). Anjum preferred to address him as a, “*Chamar* and not *Dalit*” (85) because she did not find anything disrespectful in the usage of this word. She called herself Hijra with equal pride as she called him a Chamar. Saddam narrated with truth the reason behind his conversion to Islam. His father was brutally murdered by a frenzied mob of cow vigilantes (gau rakshaks), “Everybody watched. Nobody stopped them” (89). His father was an innocent man who did the work of collecting cow carcasses but he was falsely accused of cow slaughter. This nerve shattering tragedy altered Saddam’s religious inclination and he changed his name. The memories of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussain’s execution thrilled him, and this is the reason why he changed his name from Dayachand to Saddam Hussain.

A major female character of this novel is S. Tilottama, often referred to as Tilo in the novel. She is an architect, a keen observer and a lonely wanderer. Early in the novel her name is mentioned by Dr. Azad Bhartiya who is also a participant in the political non-violent protest at Jantar Mantar headed by Hazare. However, the readers are introduced to Tilottama’s character in the words of her friend Biplab Dasgupta who studied with her at Delhi University. They met during the rehearsal of a play. Biplab reminisced about Tilo whom he secretly adored. According to him Tilo was indifferent to what people thought about her and crafted her own way of life, “The complete absence of a desire to please, or to put someone at their ease, could, in a less vulnerable person, have been constructed as arrogance. In her it came across as a kind of reckless aloneness” (154). She wore worn-out clothes and smoke bedis. He also came to know that her father was an untouchable pariah whereas her mother was a Syrian Christian. Tilo was adopted

by her own mother who had initially abandoned her because she was born out of wedlock. Her mother remained unmarried for the rest of her life and opened a school.

Tilo throughout the novel addressed Biplab as Garson Hobart (his fictional name in the play *Norman, Is that you?*). Biplab also remembered two other male characters of this novel who had befriended Tilo during her academic life. Nagaraj Hariharan, whose father was a bureaucrat, and Musa Yeswi who was a resident of Kashmir. Nagaraj as described by Biplab was, “breezy and mercurial” (157) while Musa was, “solid, dependable, a rock” (157). Nagaraj was a charmer, who flirted with girls:

He was a great showman; boisterous, witty, a bit of a bully, and utterly, hilariously merciless with the people he chose to publicly pick on. He was nice-looking, slim, boyish, a good cricketer (off-spinner), with floppy hair and glasses –very much the cool, intellectual sportsman. (157)

Musa on the other hand was, “quiet, conservatively dressed boy. . . He had a way of being in company without drawing any attention to himself, which was something of a skill. . . ” (156). All the three male friends were fascinated by the unconventional and bohemian lifestyle of Tilo. At the culmination of their academic life Musa retreated to Kashmir and became an active revolutionary demanding freedom for Kashmir, Tilo began to work with an architecture firm, Nagaraj joined mainstream journalism and Biplab was recruited in the Intelligence Bureau (I.B.).

The three men and Tilo part ways but somehow their lives are intertwined. Nagaraj married Lindy but later divorced her. In an abrupt turn of events Nagaraj married Tilo after he rescued her from the police custody in Kashmir. The policemen had raided and captured a fierce militant called commanded Gulrez from HB Shaheen the same houseboat where Tilo lodged. Though she married Nagaraj, yet soon their relationship suffered a setback. When Tilo realized

that she carried Musa's child she decided to medically terminate her pregnancy. She could not reveal this secret to Nagaraj as their marriage had not yet been consummated. She deserted Nagaraj when he hit her in a fit of inflated chauvinism that was pumped in him by his friend R.C. After these personal detours Tilo gave shelter to the abandoned child that was found at Jantar Mantar. The abandoned child was spotted by Anjum at Jantar Mantar but she could not take the child under her custody due to police intervention. The crowd at Jantar Mantar hurled false allegations against the transgenders (hijras). Some even accused the hijras of kidnapping male babies and castrating them so as to turn them into a hijra.

She rented a room in Biplab's house after departing from Nagaraj's residence. One night Saddam and Ishrat handed over the abandoned child to Tilo. She nurtured great affection for this child whom she named Miss Jebeen the Second. Miss Jebeen the First was Musa's daughter who was shot dead in a violent clash in Kashmir along with his wife Arifa Yeswi. Tilo later moved with the child to Jannat Guest House. Tilo's amorous and adventurous encounter with Musa, marriage with Nagaraj and friendship with Biplab added to the progress of the plot. She resembled wilderness that could not be domesticated by the men who loved her. She was intimate with Musa and worried about him till the end of the novel. The narrator observes regarding Tilo and Musa's relationship that:

They had always fitted together like pieces of an unsolved (and perhaps unsolvable) puzzle – the smoke of her into the solidness of him, the solitariness of her into the gathering of him, the strangeness of her into the straightforwardness of him, the insouciance of her into the restraint of him. The quietness of her into the quietness of him” (362).

While conversing with Biplab in their short meeting by the end of the novel Musa prophecies that his struggle for liberation will never culminate, and that if not granted freedom the violence in Kashmir will spread across India and destroy the entire country. He boldly asserted that:

One day Kashmir will make India self-destruct in the same way. You may have blinded all of us, every one of us, with your pellet guns by then. But you will still have eyes to see what you have done to us. You're not destroying us. You are constructing us. It's yourselves that you are destroying. (433-434)

Musa's political insight echoes with the political views of Khushwant Singh (1915-2014), a prolific Indian writer, lawyer and journalist, who discussed the process of Hara-kiri in *The End of India* (2003). Singh observed that, "the country will break up. It will not be Pakistan or any other foreign power that will destroy us; we will commit hara-kiri" (n. pag.). The Japanese tradition of Harakiri (belly cutting) also known as Seppuku is a form of a ritual suicide. Musa unknowingly pointed towards the possibility of a civil war in India.

A margin runs across every character in this novel. Anjum (born Aftab) is a transgender, Saddam Hussain (Dayachand) is a Dalit who embraces Islam, Zainab is Anjum's adopted daughter who later marries Saddam, S. Tilottama is forced to retire to the periphery of the society in the graveyard with the other outcasts on account of her courage to map the forbidden territory and her capacity to empathize with people. Miss Jebeen the Second, as revealed in a letter addressed to Dr. Azad Bhartiya is the daughter of a Maoist comrade called Maase Revathy, who had abandoned her own daughter in order to shield her from the unpredictable threats of a comrade's life. Jebeen's comrade mother had intended to name her Udaya, thus later she is named as Miss Udaya Jebeen by the inmates of the guest house. There is a reconfiguration of margins in the novel as they intersect each other. In this fictional work of Roy the margins are

not used to divide people but, on the contrary, they are employed to cement the bonds of solidarity. The borders running across individuals are finally connected to the mainstream in some or the other way. Anjum and Saddam continued delivering diligent service at their funeral parlour and Ustad Hameed began his music lessons. Tilottama also felt rejuvenated with a renewed sense of belonging at the guest house. She decided to give tuition to children who flocked around her with their parents in quest of gaining knowledge. At this point the narrator aptly remarked, “Somehow everything became a little easier to bear.” (398)

The chapter entitled, The Ministry of Utmost Happiness, harnesses the digressions of the plot and lends coherence to the narrative scheme. The challenging and emotional expedition of Roy’s characters reach a point of intersection. Almost all loose ends are tied into a unified whole at a fictional place called the Jannat Guest House. This is the place where the margins intersect. However, the title of this chapter refers to the highest degree of happiness. Utmost happiness is a phenomenon that is in contradiction to the contemporary post-modern principles. The widespread anarchy and lack of faith has created an atmosphere of uncertainty. The state of ‘utmost happiness’ amidst such turmoil seems utopic and Edenic. However, contrary to our dismal views of the current dismantling of order, Roy architects a ministerial apparatus that upholds the ideal of ‘utmost’ happiness. This ministry is not at all political in nature but humane. It is adaptable, hospitable, optimistic and most of all considerate. The all-embracing and unbiased nature of this ministry at Jannat Guest House is a source of perennial harmony and gratification. There are no dictatorial laws and no oppressive rulers but ordinary people who aspire to co-exist peacefully and allow each other to lead a meaningful life.

The graveyard where this guest house is located brims with life like a paradise on earth. Hence the element of graveyard humour in this novel is quite strong. The fine line between the

dead and the living seems to have been blurred by the inhabitants of the Jannat Guest House. Roy deliberately inverts the binary opposition between life and death to focus on the fact that the strength of humanity cannot be diminished even in the face of most grim circumstances. This peculiar guest house in the graveyard provides asylum to both humans and animals. As described by the narrator the graveyard was transformed into a zoo, “—a Noah’s ark of injured animals” (399). The narrator further observes that, “So all in all, with a People’s Pool, a People’s Zoo and a People’s School, things were going well in the old graveyard” (400). The closure of this novel is resonant and insightful. The contentment that Anjum experiences with Miss Udaya Jebeen in her arms captures the splendour of selfless love. Anjum’s midnight stroll with Udaya is more of a walk down the memory lane. In the closing lines of the novel she addresses the dung beetle in the graveyard as Guh Kyom and prophecies that, “. . . things would turn out all right in the end. They would, because they had to. Because Miss Udaya Jebeen, was come” (438).

Arundhati Roy’s political essays, novels and non-fictional works resonate with humanitarian causes. She introduces a new perspective to the corpus of Indian Writing in English. She designs a Kashmiri–English Alphabet in this novel and uses a few well-known songs, epigraphs, and poems/couplets (by South Asian poets) to repudiate the established literary hegemony. She crafts a technique of storytelling that is full of colloquial expressions, raw talk, and undiluted realism. She lays bare the ghastly facts about taboo themes such as the hazardous impact of growing urbanization on our environment, mounting globalization, the impact of nuclear tests, plundering of natural resources, marginalization of the Dalit and the transgender population, the Maoist movement, the Kashmir insurgency, escalating Hindu nationalism and infringement of human rights. The cults are redefined, the conventions are questioned and the margins are pushed from the periphery towards the center. The fragmented characters in the

novel narrate a, “shattered story” and they do this, “By slowly becoming everybody. No. By slowly becoming everything.” (436). A fine mesh of stories interwoven with literary dexterity creates a fictional universe where human desire for happiness takes varied forms. The ministry in this novel is truly democratic and secular and this is the primal reason for it being able to achieve the state of utmost happiness.

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