Societal Identity: An Exploration of Ongoing Battle with Society and Self in Arundhati Roy's *'The Ministry of Utmost Happiness'*

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Abstract

This paper delves deeply into the intricate theme of identity negotiation within Arundhati Roy's novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, with a particular focus on the character of Anjum, a transgender individual. The novel offers a rich and nuanced portrayal of Anjum's multifaceted struggles as she grapples with societal expectations, cultural norms, and her own self-perception. This abstract provides a glimpse into the in-depth analysis of Anjum's ongoing battle with society and self, shedding light on the complexities of her identity crisis. Anjum's journey serves as a poignant representation of the formidable challenges that transgender individuals often face when trying to harmonize their gender identity with the societal expectations imposed upon them. This research delves into the numerous factors that contribute to Anjum's ongoing identity negotiations, encompassing cultural traditions, religious beliefs, and the weight of societal prejudices. Furthermore, the study probes the intricate relationship between Anjum's external struggle against societal norms and her internal quest for self-acceptance.

Anjum's interactions with societal norms and prejudices act as catalysts for deep introspection, compelling her to question her own identity and her place in the world. By meticulously examining the arc of Anjum's narrative, this research highlights the diverse strategies she employs in her ongoing negotiation of identity. Anjum's interactions with other characters, her involvement in activism, and her exploration of personal relationships all contribute to her profound journey of self-discovery and self-acceptance. This paper aspires to provide a comprehensive exploration of Anjum's enduring battle with both society and self, with the aim of inspiring further inquiry into transgender narratives and the intricacies of identity negotiation in contemporary literature and society.

Keywords: Negotiation, Transgender, Identity, Cultural norms, self-perception.

Introduction:

The situation of hijras in India is complicated and has many sides. It has deep roots in the country's history, culture, and society. Hijras, who are also called eunuchs or transgender people, have been on the edges of Indian society for a long time, in a unique and disadvantaged situation. Their gender identity goes against standard gender roles, and they often have to deal with discrimination, shame, and being left out of social groups. Hijras have a long and interesting history in Indian culture. In her poem "The Dance of the Eunuchs," Kamala Das, an Indian female writer, says,

"They danced, oh, they danced until they bled." Someone had a green tattoo on their face and a jasmine flower in their hair. Some of them were dark and some were almost white. Their voices were rough, and their songs were sad. They sang about lovers who had died and children who had not been born yet. (Das, 1982)

The myths that they come from connect them to different Hindu gods and goddesses, making them regarded as gods. In the past, hijras were very important to society because they were entertainers, guardians of fertility, and people who took part in happy events like births and weddings. People who wear hijras have a strong link to gods, especially Siva, especially when he appears as an 'ardhanarisvara' (half man, half woman), Rama in the Ramayana, and Arjuna in the Mahabharata. However, how people in society feel about hijras has changed a lot over time. There are traces of respected hijras from the time of the Mughal kingdom in this book as well.

Remember that we are not just any Hijras from anywhere. We are the people who left Shahjahanabad. Our Rulers had faith in us so much that they left their wives and moms with us. We were once free to move around in their private area of the Red Fort, called the zenana. Those powerful kings and queens are no longer there. We're still here, though. (Roy, 45)

Hijras encounter a multitude of obstacles in all domains of their existence in present-day India. Societal discrimination and prejudice represent significant challenges that they frequently confront. Frequently, individuals within this demographic meet familial rejection, encounter obstacles in accessing educational and occupational prospects, and confront instances of harassment, violence, and verbal mistreatment within public domains. The discrimination experienced by hijras can be attributed to entrenched societal prejudices, cultural stigmas, and a limited comprehension or recognition of multiple gender identities. According to Kalki Subramaniam (2021), a prominent transgender activist, the issue of "othering" is a significant challenge within the transgender community, as highlighted in her interview with The Hindustan Times. Throughout the course of history, individuals have been consistently categorized and characterized as nonconformists within the established conventions of societal standards. Despite ongoing changes, we continue to be impacted by the enduring effects of centuries of misinformation that have perpetuated marginalization and injustice.

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Our desire was to establish a sense of belonging, as we sought to align ourselves with the collective rather than being perceived as separate entities. The motivation behind titling the book "We Are Not The Others" stems from our desire for inclusion. (38)

In India, the legal recognition and protection of hijras has been a subject of ongoing debate and progress. In a significant development in 2014, the Supreme Court of India officially recognized hijras as a third gender, affirming their constitutional rights and providing legal protection under various laws. This landmark decision marked a substantial step towards inclusivity and the acknowledgment of their identities. However, the effective implementation and translation of these legal rights into tangible societal changes continue to pose challenges.

One critical concern for hijras is access to healthcare and social welfare services. Many encounter difficulties in obtaining adequate healthcare due to a lack of awareness and insensitivity among healthcare providers regarding their specific needs. Additionally, their socioeconomic vulnerabilities and limited access to formal employment often result in economic hardships and exclusion from social welfare programs. Nonetheless, various governmental and non-governmental organizations are actively working to address the issues faced by hijras in India. Advocacy groups and community-based organizations are dedicated to empowering hijras, advocating for their rights, offering support services, and fostering awareness and acceptance in society. Initiatives aimed at promoting education, skill development, and entrepreneurship are also underway to improve their socioeconomic conditions.

Despite the progress being made, the journey towards full inclusion and acceptance of hijras in Indian society remains challenging. Education, awareness, and policy reforms are essential in creating an environment that respects and celebrates diverse gender identities. By embracing the unique contributions and experiences of hijras, India has the potential to progress towards a more inclusive and equitable society that upholds the rights and dignity of all its citizens, irrespective of their gender identity.

Arundhati Roy's novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, explores the character of Anjum, who serves as a compelling embodiment of the intricate and challenging process of identity negotiation. Set against the backdrop of a rapidly changing and politically charged Indian society, Anjum's battle with both societal norms and her inner self becomes a central theme in the narrative. Roy delves into the complexities of Anjum's struggle as she navigates the intersections of gender, religion, sexuality, and societal expectations. Through Anjum's journey, the novel sheds light on broader themes of belonging, acceptance, and the pursuit of individuality, aligning with Butler's perspective that gender is an actively constructed process rather than a passive definition.

Anjum, a hijra, serves as a poignant symbol of a marginalized community in India that dares to challenge the confines of traditional gender norms. Through her captivating journey, Arundhati Roy delves into the intricacies of identity, unraveling the profound tensions that emerge when an individual's self-perception clashes with the rigid expectations of society. An

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excerpt from the novel vividly describes Anjum's enduring presence in the Khwabgah, where her unique identity and only partially fulfilled dreams found a home for over three decades.

Anjum's experiences offer a microcosm of the struggles endured by those who refuse to conform to established social constructs. Roy's narrative lays bare the complexities of their existence within a society that all too often overlooks or refuses to embrace their authentic selves.

Beyond serving as a powerful character, Anjum's battle with society extends its reach to mirror the broader socio-political landscape of India. The novel seamlessly weaves its storyline through historical events like the Bhopal gas tragedy and the Kashmir conflict, effectively creating a backdrop that reflects the turmoil and fragmentation experienced within the nation. Anjum herself eloquently expresses the connection between her home in the Hijra community and the city of Delhi, emphasizing the unbroken history of her house in the face of a once-beautiful but now broken city. In this way, Anjum becomes a symbol of the struggle for identity and recognition within a society divided along religious, political, and cultural lines.

Moreover, the theme of identity negotiation extends far beyond societal constraints, delving deep into Anjum's internal conflicts. As she grapples with her own desires, doubts, and fears, Roy invites readers to contemplate the universal struggle of self-acceptance and the ongoing negotiation between individual aspirations and societal expectations. Anjum's journey stands as a poignant exploration of the intricate nature of human identity and the enduring quest for belonging and self-realization.

Delving deeper, the research seeks to investigate the intricate intersections between Anjum's gender, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, and the societal standards that play a role in her process of identity formation. By understanding these intersections, the study aims to unravel the implications and outcomes they hold for her voyage of self-discovery and self-acceptance.

In a 2018 study, Menozzi conducted an in-depth analysis of the thematic elements present in the literary works of Arundhati Roy, with a particular focus on the intricate interplay between fiction and reality within her novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. This narrative strategy is exemplified through the character of Anjum, a transgender individual residing in the Shahjahanabad district of Old Delhi. Born under the name Aftab and consistently misidentified as a boy by everyone except her parents, Anjum's true identity as a transgender woman challenges the established societal norms of her cultural environment.

An article by Suleman and Rahman in 2020 delves into the historical presence of the transgender community in India and their ongoing struggles for recognition within society. The article underscores the lack of opportunities available for them to validate their existence, resulting in their marginalization and the internalization of societal biases. By using the character Anjum from Arundhati Roy's novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, the authors illustrate the complex challenges faced by this community. Through this lens, they explore the dynamics of identity, marginalization, and cultural misunderstandings, shedding light on the existential precariousness experienced by hijras. The study provides valuable insights into

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the broader transgender issues deeply rooted in Indian society and their portrayal within fictional narratives.

Aparna, in 2018, emphasized that hijras often found themselves at odds with societal biases, leading to their exclusion from equitable treatment due to their incongruence with prevailing gender norms. Despite possessing male physical characteristics, their emotional landscape resonated with femininity, causing them to feel trapped and suppressed. Within the conventional societal framework, they encountered persistent struggles related to their sense of self, stemming from the rigid societal conventions that governed male-female dynamics. This community grappled with the absence of a defined place to call their own, often resulting in strained familial relationships. Their existence within society was marked by a lack of parity in social, economic, and political spheres. Despite these formidable challenges, they persevered within the constraints of established stereotypes, continuously striving to carve a space within the rigid gender structure.

Gender negation and societal structure:

In Arundhati Roy's novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Anjum's tumultuous struggle with both society and her own self serves as a powerful illustration of the intricate and formidable process of negotiating one's identity. Through Anjum's character, Roy delves deep into the multifaceted challenges, internal conflicts, and profound transformations that individuals undergo while trying to navigate the expectations imposed by society and grapple with their authentic sense of self. Anjum's identity is inherently intertwined with her transgender status as a hijra, which further complicates her journey.

Hijras in Indian society find themselves in a marginalized and precarious position, as they continually challenge conventional gender norms, enduring discrimination and societal stigmatization. In the words of Lakshmi Narayan Tripathi,

"Hijras are a sexual minority that is visible, and yet we are treated as the invisibles. I believe I was never invisible. I thought, 'I'm the face in the crowd, not the crowd.' (Roy 13)

Anjum's path vividly mirrors the immense difficulties faced by hijras in Indian society. Her journey encompasses the painful experience of familial rejection, the harrowing encounters with violence and abuse, and the intricate navigation of limited opportunities for education and gainful employment. Through her battle with society, Anjum becomes a poignant representation of the deeply ingrained societal biases and cultural taboos that encircle issues of gender and sexuality.

Furthermore, the novel delves into a broader exploration of the concept of gender in a thought-provoking manner. It unfolds a world where gender is not confined solely to living beings but extends its influence to encompass all things, from carpets, clothes, books, and pens to musical instruments. Each object is designated a gender, aligning it with the binary classification of either masculine or feminine, firmly rooted in the categories of man or woman. However, this conventional schema is disrupted by the birth of Anjum's child, for whom there exists no predetermined gender. This revelation serves as a lens through which individuals like Anjum, known as Hijras, emerge as compelling figures who do not conform

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to traditional gender roles. This narrative offers a contemplative glimpse into the intricacies of gender and identity within a society where rigid gender norms prevail.

Additionally, Anjum's mother's contemplation regarding the gender of her baby signifies a noteworthy aspect of the narrative. While she is cognizant of the distinct gender identity of Hijras in South Asia, often recognized as a third gender, she grapples with full acceptance of this fact. This reference underscores the diversity of gender identities within the region and emphasizes the broader theme of gender non-conformity that permeates the novel. It also initiates discourse on issues related to social and legal acknowledgment of such identities, a central concern in many societies. Implicitly, it critiques the idea that gender is an inherent and fixed characteristic, suggesting instead that gender is a societal construct imposed on all aspects of life. This highlights the deeply entrenched gender roles and expectations that shape society, aligning with contemporary conversations about the performative nature of gender. Anjum, within a world where everything is rigidly categorized as either masculine or feminine, emerges as an anomaly, emphasizing themes of isolation, otherness, and marginalization prevalent throughout the novel. The baby's ambiguous gender identity challenges conventional societal norms and exposes the struggles faced by those who do not neatly fit into established gender classifications.

Anjum's internal negotiations with her own self are equally profound. As she embarks on her journey of self-discovery, she actively questions and reevaluates her own desires, dreams, and her understanding of gender and love. She undergoes a transformative process of self-acceptance, perpetually redefining her sense of belonging and forging her unique path amid the weight of societal expectations. Her aspirations evolve as she longs for the simplicity of an ordinary life, desiring to be a mother, to awaken in her own home, dress her child Zainab in a school uniform, and send her off to school with books and a lunchbox in hand. In this pursuit, Anjum seeks to relish the ordinary joys of life, embracing her humanity and breaking free from the constraints of rigid norms.

> Now she wanted to return to the Duniya and live like an ordinary person. She wanted to be a mother, to wake up in her own home, dress Zainab in a school uniform and send her off to school with her books and tiffin box. (Roy, 30)

The socio-cultural backdrop of contemporary India, as depicted in the novel, wields a profound influence on Anjum's intricate identity negotiations. Within this narrative, historical events like the Bhopal gas tragedy and the Kashmir conflict introduce layers of complexity into her struggles. The prevailing societal biases and cultural norms pertaining to gender, religion, and politics exert a considerable impact on Anjum's transformative journey, spotlighting the intricate interplay between individual identity negotiations and the broader socio-political dynamics. The significance of Anjum's battle with society and self resonates far beyond her personal narrative. It elicits profound inquiries concerning societal acceptance, inclusivity, and the power structures that mold identities. Arundhati Roy challenges readers to engage in critical introspection regarding the multifaceted nature of identity negotiations, disrupting established paradigms of gender and sexuality while advocating for a more compassionate and all-encompassing society.

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The Ministry of Utmost Happiness delivers a profound exploration of identity negotiations, as seen through Anjum's resilient battle with both society and self. Through Roy's masterful storytelling, intricate character development, and profound examination of socio-cultural contexts, a captivating narrative unfolds, beckoning readers to contemplate the intricate nature of identity, the repercussions of societal pressures, and the transformative influence of self-acceptance when confronted with adversity. Anjum's odyssey towards self-discovery is fraught with adversity and trials. As a transgender individual, specifically a hijra, in Indian society, Anjum confronts deep-seated biases, discrimination, and marginalization. Laxmi Narayan's statement,

"We, hijras, are not hypocrites. We live our sexuality openly, being truthful to our souls and our bodies. Science and doctors assigned something else to us when we were born - which they didn't have the authority to - but we choose what we are and we are very truthful about it," (Roy 36)

underscores the authenticity of Anjum's journey. Her struggles serve as a microcosm of the broader challenges faced by hijras in India, highlighting the inherent complexities in the negotiation of one's identity. Anjum grapples with various hardships, notably the heart-wrenching rejection and isolation inflicted upon her by her own family. When her parents disown her and refuse to acknowledge her identity, the profound anguish she endures becomes a pivotal catalyst in her battle with society and self. Anjum's unyielding quest for acceptance and a sense of belonging becomes the driving force propelling her forward on her journey of self-discovery.

The novel vividly portrays the "Khwabgah" (House of Dreams) as Anjum's sanctuary of liberation and self-expression, symbolizing her escape from societal constraints. Permanently residing in the Khwabgah, Anjum discovered the freedom to embrace the attire she had longed for (p. 25). However, her dual existence in the "Duniya" (World) unsettled those around her, even evoking fear in government figures who dreaded potential hijra curses (p. 28, 67). Anjum's marginalization derived from superficial judgments, misconceptions, and deep-seated myths. Her journey aligned with anti-colonial resistance as she challenged gender hierarchies and conventional norms. Entranced by her emotional instincts, she remained within the Khwabgah for three decades. Her life took an unexpected turn when she stumbled upon an abandoned infant girl, Zainab. Anjum warmly embraced her, providing a name and care. Subsequently, witnessing the aftermath of the Gujrat massacre stemming from the Godhra train attack, Anjum underwent traumatic upheaval, prompting her to depart from the Khwabgah. Seeking solace in a local graveyard, she transformed it into the "Jannat Guest House," simultaneously initiating funeral services for the marginalized and destitute, thus establishing a sanctuary for societal betterment.

Furthermore, Anjum encounters various forms of violence and abuse throughout her life, enduring physical assaults and verbal slurs that further marginalize and dehumanize her. These experiences underscore the vulnerability and perpetual danger that hijras face within society, causing Anjum to internalize fear and mistrust. The novel highlights instances of prejudice and discrimination, exemplified when a student in a music class mocks Anjum,

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saying, "He's a She. He's not a He or a She. He's a He and a She. She-He, He-She Hee! Hee! Hee!" (Roy, 12). Such adversities expose the systemic oppression often endured by hijras, reflecting the deep-rooted biases prevalent in Indian society.

Moreover, Anjum's struggle for identity is intensified by the limited access to education, employment, and healthcare typically faced by hijras. The novel portrays Anjum's experiences navigating an unjust social system that denies her fundamental rights and opportunities. The absence of resources and support systems further compounds her challenges, rendering her quest for self-discovery and self-acceptance even more demanding. Anjum's tribulations extend beyond external forces to encompass internal conflicts and uncertainties. As she grapples with her gender identity and delves into her desires, profound questions about love, intimacy, and self-worth confront her. Anjum's journey involves an ongoing renegotiation of her self-perception and her place in society. These internal struggles exemplify the intricacies of the self-discovery process and the resilience required to navigate a world that frequently refuses to recognize one's authentic identity. The hijras in this novel often grapple with a profound sense of unease regarding their existence, with one of them confronting the protagonist,

> 'D'you know why God made Hijras?' she asked Aftab
>
> 'No, why?'
>
> 'It was an experiment. He decided to create something, a living creature
> that is incapable of happiness. So he made us.' (Roy 24)

Anjum's narrative offers a poignant reminder of the myriad challenges that individuals like her encounter in their quest for self-acceptance, a sense of belonging, and the dignity they rightfully deserve. The hardships Anjum faces in Arundhati Roy's novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, accentuate the profound complexities of identity negotiation for hijras in Indian society. Roy's portrayal of these struggles serves as a call to action, encouraging readers to confront their own biases and engage in a broader conversation about the imperative need for inclusivity, acceptance, and meaningful societal change.

In summary, Arundhati Roy's novel delves into the multifaceted and intricate nature of identity negotiations through Anjum's struggles with society and self. Through Anjum's character, Roy unravels the triumphs, challenges, and profound transformations individuals undergo as they navigate societal expectations while coming to terms with their inner selves. Anjum's journey is emblematic of the hardships faced by transgender individuals, particularly hijras, within Indian society. Her story is marked by experiences of rejection, violence, and discrimination, shedding light on the deeply ingrained prejudices that marginalize and dehumanize those who do not conform to traditional gender norms. Through Anjum's narrative, Roy underscores the urgent need for societal acceptance, inclusivity, and the assurance of equal rights.

Furthermore, Anjum's struggles encompass more than just external obstacles. She grapples with internal conflicts and uncertainties, questioning her own desires, aspirations, and understanding of love and self-worth. Her journey of self-discovery is characterized by

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resilience, courage, and an unwavering pursuit of authenticity. Through Anjum, Roy serves as a reminder of the profound complexities involved in forging one's identity and the strength required to challenge societal norms.

Conclusion

Roy's portrayal of Anjum's battle with society and self is enriched by her adept use of literary techniques and narrative elements. By employing multiple perspectives and interweaving different narratives, Roy provides a nuanced depiction of identity negotiations, highlighting the complexity and diversity of human experiences. Her masterful use of literary techniques deepens our emotional connection with Anjum's experiences, inviting us to empathize with her struggles and introspection. The sociocultural context of contemporary India further enriches the narrative, illustrating how historical events, societal biases, and cultural norms shape individual identity negotiations.

The importance of Anjum's battle with society and self extends far beyond her individual journey. It resonates with broader themes of belonging, acceptance, and the universal quest for self-realization. Through her narrative, Roy challenges readers to reflect on their own biases, prejudices, and preconceived notions about gender, sexuality, and societal expectations. She urges us to work towards creating a more inclusive and compassionate society where individuals are celebrated and embraced for their authentic selves.

In conclusion, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* stands as a profound exploration of identity negotiations through Anjum's battle with society and self. Arundhati Roy's exceptional storytelling delves into the complexities of human identity, shedding light on the hardships faced by marginalized individuals, and inspiring us to envision a world where all identities are celebrated and accepted. Anjum's journey serves as a testament to the power of resilience, self-acceptance, and the transformative potential of embracing one's true identity in the face of adversity.

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