

Analyzing the Protagonist's Identity in Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*: Gender Performativity

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Abstract: Debate of gender has traditionally been viewed as interconnected concepts in certain historical perspectives. The distinction between sex and gender is crucial, as Kate Millet's work *Sexual Politics* (1969) argues that sex is biologically determined but gender is socially constructed. In her influential work *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler posited the concept that identity is constructed through performance. The present research paper discusses Roy's *The Ministry of the Utmost Happiness* in relation to the identity of the protagonist, Anjum. The issue of gender discrimination in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is depicted by Roy through the character of Anjum. This research has employed Butler's Gender Performativity along with textual analysis by Catherine Belsey in the course of the selected novel's analysis. The study demonstrates identity of Anjum, a transgender, in motion. The protagonist keeps on changing gender identity ranging from transgender to cisgender.

Keywords: Gender Performativity, transgender, marginalization, identity

Background of the Study

The concept of social exclusion is said to have come into use only recently; the term is widely used in Europe and is believed to have been first used in France. René Lenoir (1927 – 2017), a Centrist French civil servant and politician, has been given the credit for coining the term. Social exclusion or social marginalization means discriminating against others on the basis such as gender, ethnicity, wealth, and age. It can also be defined as “the process through which individuals or groups are wholly or partially excluded from full participation in the society within which they live” (Deakin et al., 1995). It happens when people are completely or partially excluded from engaging in their community's economic, social, and political life due to their social status, category, or group membership. In India, caste, ethnicity, faith, gender, and disability are all factors that contribute to social exclusion. It is used across disciplines such as education, sociology, psychology, literature, politics, and economics. Many women are economically marginalized or socially excluded. People who are discriminated against because of their age, caste, descent, disability, ethnic origin, migrant status, race, sexual orientation, social status, or region are often victims of many forms of discrimination. People are often socially excluded in any society. However, the groups affected and the severity of prejudice, as well as the types of social exclusion, differs from one community to the next. In some ways, gender inequality may be the greatest development obstacle, while racial general discrimination may pose the greatest challenge in another. Disabled elder ladies from ethnic minority groups, for example, who are discriminated against on

multiple levels, are also the worst.

Historically, sex and gender have often been viewed as closely connected, though it is important to distinguish between the two. Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1969) argues that sex is biologically determined, while gender is shaped by social constructs (as cited in Habib, 2005, p. 670). Similarly, Simone de Beauvoir describes masculinity as the "definitive human archetype" and femininity as the "other" in her famous preface to *The Second Sex* (as referenced in Habib, 2005, p. 683). De Beauvoir contends that womanhood is not an innate condition but a social construction. Millett (1971) further explains that women are often conditioned to become submissive, uneducated, obedient, and emotional supporters of men (p. 26). Additionally, Gayle Rubin (1975) notes that gender is a flexible construct, shaped by society's enforcement of differentiation based on biological sex (p. 179). Rubin advocates for a feminist vision of a society where gender distinctions are eliminated and sexual identity becomes irrelevant (p. 204).

In the Indian context, the term "Hijra" refers to individuals who do not conform to binary gender identities, including those who are intersex, transgender, or identify as the third gender. Hijras typically adopt feminine gender roles and wear feminine clothing. Over time, the term has come to predominantly represent transgender women, rather than transgender men (Kalra, 2011). While the concept of Hijra is unique to South Asian cultures, it shares similarities with Western notions of transgender identity, though its cultural interpretations and significance differ significantly.

Judith Butler, in her seminal work *Gender Trouble* (1990), challenges traditional views of gender, asserting that it is a performative construct rather than a stable, pre-existing category. This postmodern perspective aligns with the era's deconstructive theories, suggesting that gender is enacted through performance and shaped by cultural and social contexts. For Butler, gender is not a fixed identity but an evolving and contingent construct that is performed repeatedly, gaining meaning through its enactment. This fluidity of gender challenges essentialist views and rejects fixed identities, instead emphasizing the importance of context, change, and performance. Her theories have had a profound impact on various academic disciplines, including psychology, sociology, literature, and cultural studies, especially in the fields of Queer and Trauma studies.

This research paper examines Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* through the lens of gender identity, focusing on the protagonist, Anjum. The novel explores gender discrimination, as depicted through Anjum's journey. Born as Aftab, Anjum's non-binary gender identity becomes apparent early in life, leading to a series of surgeries that transform Aftab into Anjum. After this transformation, Anjum leaves home and joins the Hijra community at the Khawbgah (house of dreams). The novel also addresses the tensions within Anjum's family, as her mother, upon discovering Anjum's gender identity, attempts to conceal it from her husband.

Research Objectives

To discuss the Identity of protagonist, Anjum, as a transgender character in the selected novel

To explore the impact of socio-domestic exclusion of the protagonist

Research Method

This research has employed Butler's Gender Performativity along with textual analysis by Catherine Belsey in the course of the selected novel's analysis. Butler contends that gender is not a fixed identity but rather a performative act shaped by societal norms and expectations. This challenges traditional views of gender as a static, inherent characteristic. In examining how *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* portrays Anjum, we can explore how she navigates her gender expression, highlighting the performative aspects of her identity. The novel underscores the social pressures that push individuals to conform to predetermined gender roles. Butler's theory provides a framework to analyze the real-world consequences of adhering to rigid gender binaries and the complexities faced by those who do not

conform.

Discussion

The novel primarily focuses on marginalized groups like as the transgender community. The issue of gender discrimination in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is depicted by Roy through the character of Anjum. The author explores the various forms of suppression and oppression transgender people encounter, as well as their social, political, geographical, and economic exclusion. Roy assumes the role of their rescuer, providing them with a platform to voice and articulate their demonstrations and demands, ensuring that they are acknowledged and attended to. She has made efforts to establish a conducive environment for individuals who are facing socio-economic disadvantages. Transgender individuals are categorized as a distinct gender, separate from the traditional binary classifications of male and female. They have long endured social marginalization, exclusion, and identity challenges due to their inability to align themselves with conventional gender norms. Consequently, they face dismissal from both their families and society at large, perpetuating their marginalized status and terming them to 'other' existence.

Socio-domestic Exclusion of the Protagonist

In the opening lines of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Anjum is introduced as someone who "lived in a graveyard like a tree" (p. 1). This comparison to a tree metaphorically dehumanizes Anjum by associating her identity with something natural yet detached, emphasizing her marginalization. Anjum, originally born as Aftab, experiences exclusion both within her home and society. Her family rejects her simply because of her gender identity. In her youth, Aftab, who shows differences from his peers, faces ridicule at music classes. The teasing from classmates is relentless: "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!" (p. 12). Like Anjum, individuals who do not conform to traditional gender roles are often subjected to rejection, harassment, and mockery.

Anjum's journey also involves significant familial rejection. Her father, Mulaqat Ali, comes to terms with the fact that Anjum's situation is irreversible, leading him and his wife, Jahanara Begum, to send her to Khwabgah, a place for those with similar gender identities. Aftab, though exceptional in ways beyond societal standards, is forced to navigate a life marked by duality—a constant push-pull between optimism and despair. In this environment, he is deprived of any chance for a fulfilling future, instead being driven to isolation. Aftab, fragmented by the hostility of society, questions the Imam: "Could you please enlighten me as to the whereabouts where aging avian creatures meet their demise? Do meteorites descend upon us in a manner reminiscent of falling stones from the sky? Are their bodies encountered in the public thoroughfares? Do you not believe that the omniscient and omnipotent entity responsible for our existence has made enough provisions for our departure from this world?"

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* delves deeply into the socio-political struggles faced by marginalized groups in contemporary India. The novel brings attention to the challenges experienced by transgender individuals, women, children, tribal populations, Kashmiris, and Dalits—communities that are often silenced and excluded by dominant societal structures. Through these characters, Roy explores the various forms of oppression—social, political, economic, and geographical—that these groups endure. The novel amplifies their voices, offering a platform for their stories to be heard and acknowledged.

Another significant character, Saddam Hussain, born Dayachand, becomes Anjum's first guest at Jannat Guest House. Born into a low caste, Dayachand's life is forever changed when his father is murdered by a mob for allegedly killing a cow. In response to the violence he faces, Dayachand converts to Islam. Like Anjum, Saddam experiences social alienation and exclusion, this time due to his caste. The rigid social structure in which he lives denies him the ability to speak freely and be treated equally. In this way, Saddam represents the subaltern within the narrative, highlighting the struggles of those silenced by the oppressive forces of caste and class in society.

Anjum's character in the light of Judith Butler's Gender Performativity

The gender performativity exhibited by the transgender community reflects their aspiration for self-transformation. Hijras manifest their self-expression by adopting highly accentuated feminine attire. In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Arundhati Roy introduces the character of Aftab, who encounters Bombay Silk on a spring morning. Bombay Silk is described as wearing bold lipstick, golden high heels, and a shimmering green satin salwar kameez (Roy, 2017, p. 18). The way she presents herself challenges conventional gender norms, signaling that she identifies as a transwoman rather than conforming to societal expectations of a typical woman. This distinction is particularly evident in the context of Shahjahanabad, where women historically adhered to strict dress codes, such as wearing burqas that covered most of their bodies except for their hands and feet (p. 18-19). The display of gender performativity by Bombay Silk contrasts sharply with these norms, illustrating the differences in societal expectations for gender presentation.

The novel also explores the theme of gender discrimination through Anjum, a character born as Aftab. As Aftab's gender identity evolves and becomes more apparent, it leads to her transformation into Anjum after undergoing several surgeries. Anjum's transition marks a turning point, as she leaves her family and moves to the Hijra community in the Khawbgah, a space designated for those with similar gender identities. Anjum's mother struggles to accept her child's identity, initially trying to conceal the truth from her husband. Her reaction to Anjum's non-normative gender identity is one of shock and fear, as she had expected a "normal" son. This moment is described powerfully, as the mother's understanding of reality crumbles: "There, in the abyss, spinning through the darkness, everything she had been sure of until then, every single thing, from the smallest to the biggest, ceased to make sense to her" (p. 8).

Anjum's journey exemplifies the tension between her gender identity and societal expectations. She is forced to perform gender in a way that aligns with societal norms, even as her identity contradicts these conventions. Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity helps illuminate Anjum's experiences. According to Butler, gender is not something inherent but is rather performed through actions. In her *Gender Trouble* (revised preface), Butler explains that individuals do not possess a pre-existing gender identity but instead develop one through the repetition of gendered behaviors. Gender identity is stabilized through these performances, and the very concept of gender is constructed through social practices. In the case of Anjum, the roles imposed on her are not inherent but socially constructed, with her identity being continuously shaped through her performances. Throughout the novel, Anjum transitions from a domestic individual to a marginalized transgender person, moving from home to the Khawbgah and eventually to a graveyard, signifying the various stages of her identity reconstruction.

The transgender community in the novel is depicted as queer and marginalized, positioned as "misfits" within the broader social framework of Indian society. Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* serves as a case study of queer lives in the specific sociopolitical context of Delhi. Individuals whose lives do not conform to the dominant patriarchal model are portrayed as living in a state of social death, constantly alienated from mainstream society. This cultural rejection perpetuates the trauma experienced by transgender individuals, further marginalizing them and denying them the right to participate fully in society.

Ultimately, Roy's novel explores the transformative aspirations of transgender individuals, focusing on Anjum's journey as she seeks liberation from societal constraints. Her pursuit of freedom within the Khawbgah, or House of Dreams, symbolizes a constructive attempt to transcend the oppressive societal structure and create a space for self-expression and identity.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates identity of Anjum, a transgender, in motion. They keep on changing gender identity ranging from transgender to cisgender. According to Judith Butler's theory of gender

performativity, gender should not be seen as a fixed or static phenomenon but rather as something that continuously evolves. This fluidity is evident in the character of Anjum in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Anjum experiences mistreatment both at home and in society due to her gender identity, which leads to a significant transformation in her sense of self and her living situation. She moves from her family home to the Dream House (Khawbgah) and eventually to the graveyard, symbolizing her ongoing journey of self-reconstruction. Her exclusion from mainstream society results in a profound sense of isolation and marginalization. Anjum's character is portrayed as "queered," challenging the established norms of society. Her non-normative gender identity sparks transphobia, which manifests as anger and oppression directed toward her. Despite these challenges, Anjum persistently redefines her identity in ways that defy societal expectations. Through her journey, Arundhati Roy amplifies the voices of subaltern groups, specifically transgender individuals, and empowers Anjum as she pursues transformative aspirations for herself and others in the community. In doing so, Roy highlights the resilience and agency of transgender people, advocating for their right to self-expression and a life beyond societal marginalization.

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