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## The City as Medusa, Grandma and Whore in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

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### **Abstract**

The paper assesses the city of Delhi as it is perceived and depicted in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, the second novel of Booker-prize winning author, political essayist and writer-activist Arundhati Roy and the ways in which it challenges a hegemonic perception of urban spaces and through these spaces, the perception of a developing nation in an age of neoliberal capitalism and globalization in the free market. The paper underscores the various metaphors, figurative allusions and the shifting personas the city acquires and the gendering and transitioning it undergoes at the hands of the author. Likewise, the paper attempts an understanding of the city as a many-layered, living, breathing entity with surprises and secrets, celebrations and heartbreaks, as much a character and as human with an intimate and intense subject status as any of the inmates inhabiting it. It looks at the city space as an empowering and enabling agency offering shelter, variety, anonymity and opportunity to those who seek it and the cityscape as frequently alienating, ruthless and indifferent, foregrounding the juxtaposition of these two sharply contrasting images and the symbolic significance of them.

### **Keywords**

city, identities, globalization, gender, development

The first chapter of Roy's second work of fiction which came after what can hardly be termed as an interim, of nearly 20 years is called 'Where do Old Birds go to Die?', the preoccupation with space, implicit in the very title of this chapter. The opening line of the novel goes thus: 'She lived in the graveyard like a tree'. Roy is known for her unconventional style, her radical stance and her 'in-your-face' writer's attitude. And yet this first line is more than the most unconventional and the most radical. The person is a 'she' and is compared to a tree. The graveyard is an in-between space where the being undergoes a transition, a space that symbolizes the overlapping of two worlds, the real and the unreal if one wishes to address it as such; a space people are aware of and yet do not want to frequent unless they absolutely have to. A space which people would often ignore as they walk past it and yet are utterly helpless when it comes to avoiding it for it is, if anything, everyone's final destination, a constant reminder of the being's finitude. But here's a human who makes the graveyard her home. 'She' refers to Anjum, the transgender in the novel who in many ways is the connecting link between the characters, and her house, the haven that the misfits and the castaways seek.

The reader's introduction to the space Anjum inhabits, is not through the city where she lives, but a particular space within that city: the graveyard. Is it because the city is too big, or too cramped, too well laid out or too messy that despite its many spaces, it seems to give up on her and fails to accommodate her as she moves from its underbelly to its extremities? The chapter describes Anjum the transgender's other-worldly and solitary life in the graveyard with a mention of the Khwabgah at the very end and it is only in the second chapter called 'Khwabgah', in the opening lines, that one comes to know that Anjum was born as Aftab in 'Shahjahanabad, the walled city of Delhi.' (7) - the phrase 'walled city' suggesting something like a barrier that engages in the dexterous task of spatial management of including and excluding people much like the nation state.

Delhi gets a mention in the subsequent paragraphs in the context of Hazrat Sarmad Shaheed's dargah where Anjum's mother goes to seek respite and solace. The *dargah* seems to be that space that does not give any answers to her predicament of having brought forth a *hijra* into the world; nonetheless it is an alternate space which seems to be more accommodating and less intimidating than the space within the four walls of her house as Aftab/Anjum's mother Jahanara Begum, walking past, 'the crowd – the sellers of ittar and amulets, the beggars, the homeless, the goats being fattened for slaughter on Eid and the knot of quiet elderly eunuchs under a tarpaulin inside the shrine - ...entered the tiny chamber...became calm' (11).

The dargah is symbolic and significant in its physical presence as it stands for the love of two men, again marginalized entities and would be a marginalized space in itself, had the facts been in conscious public memory and not taken over by lore:

Not all the visitors to Hazrat Sarmad Shaheed's dargah knew his story. Some knew parts of it, some none of it and some made up their own versions. Most knew he was a Jewish Armenian merchant who had travelled to Delhi from Persia in pursuit of the love of his life. Few knew the love of his life was Abhay Chand, a young Hindu boy he had met in Sindh. Most knew he had renounced Judaism and embraced Islam. Few knew his spiritual search led him to renounce orthodox Islam too. (9)

And that is the first of the many unpleasant serpents in Medusa's head that Roy draws the reader's attention to. She navigates through the serpentine lanes and by-lanes of Delhi which no English-educated, English-speaking, brand-conscious, middle class Indian who sees their country as a rising star in the era of globalization would like to venture into or even go close to and spaces which mostly such Indians are either indifferent to, in contempt of or in denial of. From peers to fakirs, transgenders to terrorists, insurgents to irreverents, who occupy most of the narrative space but otherwise take up very little space in the neoliberal imaginary of a developing nation state, the people and the spaces that Roy includes in the literary and the narrative space of her novel are mostly those that the construct of a hegemonic nation state will often exclude. The pages of the novel come to life because of these precarious beings and spaces – spaces that are peopled by those who are not legal citizens, people politically invisibilised, historically oppressed, socially stigmatized, economically deprived; in other words, people who are expendable and therefore not particularly “grievable” - human projects in precarity. Spaces that are on the margins and where people live on the edge and are constantly falling through the cracks and the fissures between worlds.

Roy brings Delhi to life in a different way. She takes the reader to the ‘Light and Sound Show’ at the Red Fort and makes them watch the show through the eyes of a transgender trying to trace the fleeting yet unmistakable presence of her community in the historic narrative of this amazingly ancient and cosmopolitan city. The Khwabgah or the House of Dreams in Anjum's neighbourhood where she eventually moves to with the other transgenders (from mixed religious and cultural backgrounds) and undergoes her transition from Aftab to Anjum is the alternative space (and another serpent in Medusa's formidable head) within the hegemonic, heterosexual and religio-ethnic space of the Muslim neighbourhood which otherwise stands marginalized and probably ghettoed (and can qualify as yet another of Medusa's serpents) when one looks at the bigger picture called ‘Delhi’, a metropolis and the capital of a great nation state. And yet it is in the space called Khwabgah that Aftab, before becoming Anjum feels that, ‘It was the only place in his world where he felt the air made way for him. When he arrived, it seemed to shift, to slide over, like a school friend, making room for him on a classroom bench’ (19).

Of course Old Delhi merits attention, the attention of occasional feature writers for newspapers when they run out of stories and would like to do the occasional minority ethnic story of the city from a purely objective angle that positions Delhi as a haven of diversity and coexistence:

...a weekend special about Old Delhi... some close-ups of Mughal cuisine, long shots of Muslim women in burqas on cycle rickshaws that plied the narrow filthy lanes, and of course the mandatory bird's-eye view of thousands of Muslim men in white skullcaps, arranged in perfect formation, bowed down in prayer in the Jama Masjid. Some readers viewed pictures like these as proof of the success of India's commitment to secularism and inter-faith tolerance. (14)

The imagery the lines stimulate makes it more than obviously objective as the muslim minority community is denied a face and the focus is on the thriving numbers and India's benevolent gesture of accommodating this bulging minority.

So why this insistence upon the metaphor of Medusa for the city of Delhi? Who is Medusa? She is not even part of our collective unconscious as a civilization or a culture or a part of *our* myths and yet she is so relevant. So much our very own. Medusa is a goddess and a gorgon in Greek mythology. She is fascinating and repulsive, bewitching and loathsome at once; a frightening presence and yet an indispensable one who one is forced to notice and acknowledge just like the people in the novel – Anjum, Musa, Tilo, Saddam Hussain, Dr. Azad and Comrade Massey Revathi, each a serpentine presence, a threat to the image of the nation state, all residing in Medusa's head.

Yet Medusa needs to be contained and is formidable because she has serpents springing out of her head. Serpents that progressive, forward-looking humans do not take to well, do not react positively to, serpents that humans have a primordial fear and abhorrence for. These are crawling, writhing creatures that can be dangerous and unpredictable. The underbelly of Delhi, the invisible spaces Roy courses through, is no less or better than Medusa's head with the expendable, writhing and crawling, serpentine beings with serpentine thoughts and tendencies and conflicts which these spaces shelter, harbour and produce, which are a menace to the 21<sup>st</sup> century image of the nation state. In fact, such are these beings that they do not understand the challenges of the nation state; they are indifferent to it. This is brought out in many instances through several interactions between the characters – to cite one of them, when Nimmo Gorakhpuri, one of the *hijras* at Khwabgah shatters the illusion of the Khwabgah as the metaphorical alternative universe and distils the truth as she compares the normative and non-normative worlds:

No one's happy here. It's not possible. *Arrey yaar*, think about it, what are the things you normal people get unhappy about? Price-rise, children's school admissions, husbands' 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)

People at the margins embody and live a daily conflict which is beyond the pale of the imagination of those who are a part of mainstream society. So they need to be quietened. Just like Medusa who is also a threat and her head with its serpents needs to be severed. Medusa is a woman and a hydra-headed woman can be up to no good. That is why in Roy's narrative, one chances upon Delhi's hydra-headed side in its underbelly, not in the plush houses and neatly trimmed, exactly perpendicular lanes of the bureaucratic spaces of *New Delhi*. The narrative creates a fascinating juxtaposition of New and Old Delhi where the two personas, presented in a binary, fail to engage in a dialogue and yet the mere juxtaposition and the crossing over of the characters from one realm into the other or one space into the other suggests so much. Where the confounded reader tries to figure out which of them is the persona and which, the shadow in Jungian terms. As are the old and new urban spaces juxtaposed, so are conflicting emotions and experiences of alienation and nostalgia, longing and love, desire and discretion.

As Roy rightly says in one of her interviews, it is only a surface level coexistence that one comes across in India where the buffalo and the Mercedes Benz are part of the same journey and caught in the same traffic jam. However deep down she claims that we are

really a deeply stratified, deeply compartmentalized society with our own closets and ghettos which the spatial depictions in the novel represent; like Anjum's 'Flyover Story' which her adopted daughter loves hearing again and again and which occurs in one of South Delhi's urbane high class localities near Defence Colony at the time of Emergency, a period in independent India's history, synonymous with totalitarianism. This is when the police descended on a wedding, arrested people, beat up some mercilessly and how Anjum and the rest of the *hijras* attending it ran for dear life pissing and tumbling in their 'diaphanous clothes' (35):

They ran in blind terror like ghouls...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)

Anjum, while narrating the story edits the horrible parts for her daughter and gives her only the funny side of how she 'soo-ed in our ghagra' (33) and how the huge advertisement of a hoarding of Bombay Dyeing with a woman in a towel refused to lend Anjum her towel and how Anjum kept running with '*garam-garam* (warm) *soo* running down...*thanda-thanda* (cold) legs' (34), making it apparent how coiled serpents need to be driven away, persecuted and if need be, ruthlessly dealt with.

It is the trauma of the Gujarat riots and the witnessing of mass killings including that of her dear friend who she was visiting Gujrat with, that leaves a permanent imprint on Anjum's mind. The trauma results in a transformation of her appearance and once she returns to Delhi, makes her relocate from the Khwabgah, to the graveyard, another of Meudsa's serpents, though perhaps a little dormant. The rooms of Anjum's house on the graveyard are actually built on the graves. The graves themselves overlap, the bodies they encase, possibly in each other's embrace much like the people above the ground, as Anjum's house slowly becomes a haven for all kinds of precarious beings living on the edge or having experienced jumping off a cliff as Anjum says:

Once you have fallen off the edge like all of us have...you will never stop falling. And as you fall you will hold on to other falling people. Here there is no *haqeeqat*. *Arre*, even we aren't real. We don't really exist. (84)

Besides Anjum's guesthouse turned house, the serpents - the many communities and representative groups from across the Indian nation state congregate in Delhi at the Jantar Mantar with their grievances and miseries, their trials and tribulations and get just the right amount of visibility conferred by the media, cohorts of the nation state to project the picture of a thriving democracy that accommodates all: 'Communists, secessionists, revolutionaries, dreamers, idlers, crackheads, crackpots, all manner of freelancers, and wise men...milled around' (101).

Roy actually brings in the metaphor of Medusa comparing Delhi with its winding flyovers to the coiled and writhing serpents in her head - where the physical reality of the city and the precarious beings inhabiting it, fuse to form one imagery of the gorgon. Jantar Mantar is the place where the new born baby abandoned by her Naxalite mother finds foster parents and a foster home - a place where she initially seemed 'utterly alone' (96):

Around her the city sprawled for miles. Thousand-year-old sorceress, dozing, but not asleep...Grey flyovers snaked out of her Medusa skull, tangling and untangling under the yellow sodium haze. Sleeping bodies of homeless people

lined their high, narrow pavements, head to toe, head to toe, head to toe, looping in the distance. (96)

And this is also the exact juncture in the novel where the city transforms from the sleeping gorgon to a benign Grandmother who in turn is forced by those who claim ownership over her to transform into a wilting whore as Roy continues with her description:

Old secrets were folded into the furrows of her loose, parchment skin. Each wrinkle was a street, each street a carnival. Each arthritic joint a crumbling amphitheatre where stories of love and madness, stupidity, delight and unspeakable cruelty had been played out for centuries. But this was to be the dawn of her resurrection. Her new masters wanted to hide her knobby, varicose veins under imported fishnet stockings, cram her withered tits into saucy padded bras and jam her aching feet into pointed high-heeled shoes. They wanted her to swing her stiff-old hips and re-route the edges of her grimace upwards into a frozen, empty smile. It was the summer Grandma became a whore. (96)

Grandma has no alternative but to painfully and reluctantly metamorphose into a whore as she has a role to play in the whole neoliberalism and globalization charade every time a foreign delegation comes from the first world to visit this exotic city with its Mughal gardens and fountains. She cannot let India down, the newest and most desirable financial destination of the world even as her rulers get ready to put a price tag to her, double-crossing pimps who act surreptitiously for their own personal gains:

She was to become supercapital of the world's favourite new superpower. *India! India!* The chant had gone up – on TV shows, on music videos, in foreign newspapers and magazines, at business conferences and weapon fairs, economic conclaves and environmental summits, at book festivals and beauty contests. *India! Inida! India!* (96-97)

The lines have an almost incantatory feel to them indicating the intoxicating and delirious indulgence in this charade of middle class India largely because of its complacency and partly because of its indifference to the 'other' truths, the alternate realities and the people who continue to be invisibilised, neglected, deprived, disenfranchised and denied their rights as citizens. People have been conditioned into believing that all's well with the world and this is the way forward as 'Skyscrapers and steel factories sprang up where forests used to be, rivers were bottled and sold in supermarkets, fish were tinned, mountains mined and turned into shining missiles' (98).

Delhi cannot afford to look like Medusa. Medusa's unobliging and troublesome serpents cannot be defanged or severed so she needs to be walled out and kept out of bounds. Delhi needs to be propped up like a glam doll to attract dollar billionaires and foreign investors and paraded in borrowed clothes. The rags need to be hurriedly hidden, the stench driven away with a deluge of perfumes and roads readied, people swept under the carpet for the presentation to be perfect and that's how grand old ma turns into a whore. A whore who can conceal her overused, over-exploited body with its carefully hidden scars to fetch some big capital. The ones who offer her for a deal are happy with whatever they may be able to extract. Because after the visit the whore can go back to being a Grandma but there is resistance all around even as the effort is on, as villages are emptied and millions

of people forced to move to the fringes of the city and joblessness and homelessness lead to riots and resistance movements.

Roy's tone is dipped in sarcasm towards the fourth estate as she describes media coverage when she observes how, 'in the summer of her renewal, Grandma broke' (99):

Fiercely competitive TV channels covered the story of the breaking city as 'Breaking News'. Nobody pointed out the irony. They unleashed their untrained, but excellent-looking young reporters, who spread across the city like a rash, asking urgent, empty questions; they asked the poor what it was like to be poor, they asked the hungry what it was like to be hungry, the homeless what it was like to be homeless...The TV channels never ran out of sponsorship for their live telecasts of despair...Experts aired their expert opinion for a fee. *Somebody* has to pay the price for Progress, they said expertly. (99)

The fallout of free market economy and neoliberalism is conveyed through the metaphor of Delhi, the grand old city that undergoes a confused transformation and is finally caught between being a Grandma and a whore with indicators of urbanization and economic progress on the one hand and increasing immigration of the displaced that settle on the margins of the city on the other. The juxtaposition of the privileged and the invisibilised, the predicament of entitlement is poignantly described through powerful imagery as:

All day long the roads were choked with traffic. The newly dispossessed, who live in the cracks and fissures of the city, emerged and swarmed around the sleek, climate-controlled cars, selling cloth dusters, mobile phone chargers, model jumbo jets, business magazines, pirated management books (*How to Make your First Million, What Young India Really Wants*)...tiny national flags mounted on stands that said *Mera Bharat Mahan*, My India is Great. (100)

And then:

On the city's industrial outskirts, in the miles of bright swamp tightly compacted with refuse and colourful plastic bags, where the evicted had been 're-settled' the air was chemical and the water poisonous. Clouds of mosquitoes rose from thick, green ponds. Surplus mothers perched like sparrows on the debris of what used to be their homes and sang their surplus children to sleep. (100)

## Conclusion

Delhi's urban, bureaucratic, sophisticated space is steeped in artifice and flamboyance, protocol and niceties where emotions are stifled and relationships are a formality just like a nicely groomed, presentable and necessary escort, while the guesthouse in the graveyard thrives and burgeons, accommodating the living, the dead, the invisibilised, the outlawed and the marginalized, not just humans but animals too. Jantar Mantar on the other hand is that space which is like the lap of the grand old mother where every troubled child comes to seek solace; where people with trauma, activists with grievances and politicians with agendas can be accommodated and escape into an alternative universe, albeit for some time. Grandma allows babies to be birthed, abandoned, abducted and loved. Because the grand old dame knows best. The belligerent, the cynical, the petulant and the peevish, Grandma calls out to everyone. Grieving widows, traumatized

mothers, optimistic petitioners, agitated activists, opportunistic politicians, sidekicks, props, cheerleaders and janitors - all jostle for space and somehow fit in.

This, with the Medusa imagery is what sustains the city of Delhi and the lives that live precariously in it. The city allows anonymity and camaraderie to coexist through chaos and enables its inmates with their broken backs to fall and crawl in step with each other and give space to one another whenever they need it. This is more than evident in the number and range of people that Anjum hosts and accommodates in the graveyard guesthouse including Tilottama who in no way can be said to belong there as she belongs to an entirely different class, the class of the privileged, the entitled. And yet, Tilo crosses over to embrace the underbelly of Delhi because that is where life thrives, in a graveyard where the dead and the alive conglomerate and celebrate and the ‘about-to-die’, the likes of Musa can seek temporary refuge.

Perhaps through these enduring metaphors, Roy is alluding to the power of the city to sustain and support, despite everything, a deep humanity and liquid empathy which can be found only in its underbelly, the serpents of Medusa who nestle in Grandma’s lap when they crawl out of her head.

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