



Conceptualizing Heterotopia and Thirdspace of Transgenders in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

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Abstract

Spatiality, as a discursive category, appears to be embedded within a seemingly politicized domain in contemporary times. Theorists like Foucault and Soja articulate the spatial possibilities of human existence where implications of power play a significant role in the spatial construction of individuals. Spatiality has now emerged as one of the most significant elements in understanding gender dynamics in the present context, as the intersection of space with gender complicates the living experiences of those who do not affiliate to the identity attributes within biological or physiological pointers that conform to the socio-cultural paradigms. In this context, the transgenders commonly known as *hijras* in India are one of the ancient transgender groups in the world who despite having a visible presence in the society and history have been subjected to oppression and marginalization to the point of erasure and made invisible. Arundhati Roy, in her novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* provides the space for these transgender people, their struggles and experiences as spatial beings made manifest through the protagonist Anjum. She lives in the Foucauldian heterotopic space of the cemetery after leaving the safe space of the *hijra* Gharana Khwabgah. Roy in this novel explores the relationship between space and transgender as manifested with the incorporation of heterotopia and thirdspace in terms of Anjum's various experiences.

Keywords

cityspace, *hijra*, heterotopia, thirdspace, transgender

Space is fundamental in any form of communal life: space is fundamental in any exercise of power.

– Foucault in *Rabinow* (252)

Space is not innocent of gender, and gender is not unaware of space.

– Datta (1)

Introduction

We experience gender in spatial facets; gender and space are interconnected and influence each other rather in a complex way. Gender intersects with space and creates the cultural depictions of gendered identities in different ways in different spaces. Spatiality has now emerged as one of the most significant elements in understanding gender in today's world. Queer theorist Judith Butler's 'performativity of gender' suggests the link between gender performance and space for the first time. Her claim of gender as unstable and "instituted in an exterior space" (Butler 191) opens the debate between space and gender in the feminist discourse and eventually the theoretical paradigm of cultural studies. Her seminal work *Gender Trouble* (1990) focuses on how gendered bodies negotiate through various spaces of everyday life while producing in the social space, gendered identities situated in the practices of lived lives.

While talking about gender, it is, therefore, not surprising that we understand gender in binary terms of men and women in relation to the everyday tasks they perform within their respective socio-cultural contexts. This deep cultural connotation and social construction of gender binaries remained rather unchallenged till the late 20th century. The emergence of queer theory during the last few decade questions, subverts, and challenges the gender hierarchies that had been conventionally stabilized and legitimized in our private and public spaces. Transgender, the terminology that is applied to individuals who identify themselves neither as man nor woman, is the queer umbrella term that further complicates the stereotypical gendered spaces in our society. The term transgender "accounts for how cultures from around the world have created spaces for gender variation in social institutions and traditions that allow for the expression of gender that differs from the anatomical sex of an individual at birth" (Horswell 3236). However, social institutions and cultural practices appear to neglect and attempt to deliberately derecognize the transgender space for ages despite their visible presence within the society since long. It is only recently that transgender issues seem to have gained recognition and representation through political activism, academia as well as the entertainment industry.

Literature is one such form of articulating and representing the complex dynamics between space and transgender issues leading to further scope for analyses of the politics of spatiality and gendered production of truth/knowledge. It needs no separate mention that the plight of the so-called individuals belonging to the third gender is way beyond explication in the current modern society. There is always a sense of relegation and redundancy which surround the very existence of the lives of the third-gendered people. "Transgender community is one of the most deprived and disempowered groups in the Indian society who are not treated as humans and left to pass as an isolated life" (Sharma 12).

One of the prolific Indian writers, Arundhati Roy's works engage with discursive cultural practices in Indian society while making an attempt to challenge the hegemonizing tendencies embedded within. This paper makes an effort to explore the issues of transgender manifestations in spatial dimensions as represented in Arundhati Roy's second novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), using Foucault's concept of heterotopia and Edward Soja's thirdspace. An attempt shall be made to employ the theoretical framework of transgender studies and tools of cultural studies in exploring the link between gender and space in the novel as "[...] after the Second World War, space began to reassert itself in critical theory, rivalling if not overtaking time" (Tally Jr. 9).

Theorizing Space

Spatiality, as a discursive category, appears to be embedded within a seemingly politicized domain in contemporary times. The spatial turn in literary theory engenders in the works of poststructuralists Michel Foucault, Henry Lefebvre, Edward Soja, and Homi Bhabha among others, whose works reconceptualise our understanding of space, culture, and society. "The theoretical approaches of Henri Lefebvre, Michel Foucault, or Edward Soja have emphasized that space is not materially given, but rather is the product of social practices, of power formations, and of ideologies" (Eibl 9). Salman Rushdie has made a very pertinent remark regarding the intricate connection between human beings and the geographical land they live in:

It may be argued that the past is a country, from which we have all emigrated, that its loss is part of our common humanity. Which seems to be self-evidently true; but I suggest that the writer who is out-of-country and even out-of-language may experience this loss in an intensified form. It is made more concrete for him by the physical fact of discontinuity, of his present being in a different place from his past, of his being "elsewhere". (56)

Michel Foucault, in his work, 'Of Other Spaces' offers for the first time a new comprehension of space. His heterotopias are the alternative spaces that are opposed to the utopian spaces – "those singular spaces to be found in some given social spaces whose functions are different or even the opposite of others" (in *Rabinow* 252), an idea reiterated in Werde's observation – "Foucault's heterotopias break down spatial hierarchies and binaries and thus subvert the forms of knowledge and meaning that underpin the dominant power structure. Even as heterotopias are spaces set apart from everyday life, they are, unlike Utopias, also a part of the everyday and defined by their relations with other spaces" (11). Foucault called heterotopias "the space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs" (3), such as mirrors, cemeteries, prisons, motels, gardens, theatres, old age homes etc. "These spaces are capable of juxtaposing in a single real place, several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (Foucault 6).

Postmodern urban theorist Edward Soja uses Foucault's heterotopia and remaps Lefebvre's 'representational space' and develops his thirdspace concept, borrowing the term from Homi K. Bhabha. In his book *Thirdspace* (1996), Soja conceptualizes space to challenge the notions of permanence and homogeneity. His radical Thirdspace "can be

described as a creative recombination and extension, one that builds on a First space perspective that is focused on the “real” material world and a Secondspace perspective that interprets this reality through “imagined” representations of spatiality” (Soja 6). Thirdspace is the lived space that is constantly evolving and extremely fluid. “Everything comes together in thirdspace: subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the discipline and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history” (Soja 56-57). Thus, the Thirdspace is “an-Other way of understanding” (10) as well as being critically aware of the spatial dimensions of human life which destabilizes social hierarchies and celebrates heterogeneity, contradiction, and polyphony. This makes it clear that “space is not an empty or neutral container – or a blank canvas upon which – social interactions take place” (Ford 178):

Human geography over the last two decades has undergone a profound conceptual and methodological renaissance that has transformed it into one of the most dynamic, innovative, and influential of the social sciences. The discipline, which long suffered from a negative popular reputation as a trivial, purely empirical field with little analytical substance, has moved decisively from being an importer of ideas from other fields to an exporter, and geographers are increasingly being read by scholars in the humanities and other social sciences. (Warf & Arias 1)

The Novel: *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

Arundhati Roy’s second and the much-awaited fiction *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is a highly political novel, published after twenty long years from her first and Booker awarded novel *The God of Small Things* (1997). The novel fictionalizes the present political Indian scenario of the outcast, the minorities, the ‘other’ – their fragmented lives, struggling for their identity in a rather conservative society. The novel tells a “shattered story” of people ranging from Kashmir to Kerala, from Gujarat to the North-East encompassing an extensively diverse political, economic, cultural, and religious realm across the Indian subcontinent. It is a polyphonic story that “negotiates with class, caste and gender identities, and the conflict that arises out of the aggressive monolithic identity of the Hindutva regime that seeks to erase the plurality that defines the nation” (Gopinath 2).

The story revolves around the two protagonists the *hijra* Anjum, who lives in the Foucauldian heterotopic cemetery, and the unconventional woman Tilottoma (Tilo), an architect who later became an activist. Their stories and the people around them represent the marginalized voices telling and re-telling the contemporary Indian social discourse. The novel creates a space for the subaltern voices– that of the *hijras*, the Dalits, the Kashmiris’ separatist movements, the Adivasi – Maoist movements, the Manipuri nationalists to name a few. “It becomes vital to clear a space and find a way of presenting their stories afresh, of seeking not to deny their otherness, but to demonstrate that this is not grounds for othering” (Lau and Mendes 105). In Roy’s own words she is telling a “shattered story ... by slowly becoming everything” (436).

This paper shall focus primarily on the transgender space that Roy creates for the *hijra* community through her protagonist Anjum and other *hijra* characters connected to her in the story.

Heterotopia, Thirdspace, and Transgender

Soja believes postmodern feminism seeks a “consciously political grounding of critique and resistance in the spatiality of social life” (Soja 112) and we see Arundhati Roy in her novel engaging with the notion of space in a similar manner. The manner of the portrayal of spatiality in her novel allows her to elaborate upon the seditious articulation of the unconventional *hijra* protagonist, Anjum. She lives in a Foucauldian heterotopic cemetery after leaving *Khwabgah*, the *hijra* Gharana of her locality in Old Delhi. Foucault describes the cemetery as heterotopic for having a specific function of connecting people in a strange way “since each individual, each family has relatives in the cemetery” (Foucault 5). The novel begins with Anjum living in the cemetery “like a tree” (Roy 3). In the beginning, people bother her and bully her by calling “her names – clown without a circus, queen without a palace” (Roy 3). Roy portrays her to be almost an invisible character in this world with no substantial position and authority of her own in society. It was unacceptance and rejection that surrounded her life to a great extent which found some kind of solace at the Jannat Guest House, the comfort zone for the *hijras* as shown in the novel. It was seen to be a place having numerous features and traits which made Anjum feel herself like a “mehfil”:

It doesn't matter. I'm all of them, I'm Romi and Juli, I'm Laila and Majnu. And Mujna, why not? Who says my name is Anjum, I'm Anjuman. I'm a mehfil. I'm a gathering. Of everybody and nobody, of everything and nothing. Is there anyone else you would like to invite? Everyone's invited. (Roy 4)

Despite being visibly present in history, myths, and epics, the Indian transgender or the *hijra* community has always been living at the margins of society. They have been denied entry into the civil and central spaces of the society to the point of erasure and made invisible, which Roy subverts by giving Anjum the central space in her novel. She brings the manifold stories of the *hijra* lifestyle to the mainstream narrative through Anjum and other *hijra* characters in the novel. Although Anjum apparently lives in the heterotopic space of a graveyard, yet it is only understandable why Roy has chosen to place her in such a space where she can transcend the patriarchal hierarchies and politics of a traditional *hijra* Gharana, *Khwabgah*. Despite the fact that her adopted daughter Zainab refuses to accompany her, Anjum leaves *Khwabgah* which can no longer fulfill her emotional needs after her traumatic experience of the Gujarat pogrom in 2002.

Her trauma of the Gujarat riot compels her to leave the traditional *hijra* space of the *Khwabgah* where she wanted to come desperately and live happily once in her life. In this sense, the heterotopia of the cemetery is used as a safe space for the Muslim *hijra* Anjum to sustain herself against the dominant ideological political practices of the current regime in India. The sense of not belonging to a specific place in the society was painfully echoed by Anjum in the following lines, “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" (Roy 84).

The cemetery where she lives "was an unprepossessing graveyard, run-down, not very big and used only occasionally. Its northern boundary abutted a government hospital and mortuary where the bodies of the city's vagrants and unclaimed dead were warehoused until the police decided how to dispose of them" (Roy 58). There are also a few homeless people and drug addicts living among whom Anjum does not feel unsafe, "[in] that setting, Anjum would ordinarily have been in some danger. But her desolation protected her. Unleashed at last from social protocol, it rose around her in all its majesty—a fort, with ramparts, turrets, hidden dungeons and walls that hummed like an approaching mob" (Roy 61). The graveyard slowly becomes "home; a place of predictable, reassuring sorrow – awful, but reliable" (Roy 66). She transforms her derelict space in the graveyard to 'Jannat Guest House' which is built on the same place where her family is buried. It gradually becomes "a hub for Hijras who for one reason or another, had fallen out of, or been expelled from, the tightly administered grid of Hijra Gharanas" (68). Her heterotopic space embraces all the Others like Saddam Hussain (Dayachand); a disguised Dalit to its premise. Later it becomes "Jannat Guest house and Funeral Services" which is survived by Anjum bribing the police officials and driving the municipal authorities away with her "legendary abilities" of embarrassing.

The world that Anjum creates for the marginals in the heterotopic cemetery is the one where they can carve "out new spaces for themselves, [while] defying convention, trying possible new lives, and testing out new roles" (Githika and Mangaiyarkarasi 834). Soja brings radical and rigorous meaning to Foucault's heterotopia as his thirdspace brings all that constitutes the living experience. According to Soja, a thirdspace is an "epistemological and theoretical critique that revolves around disruptions and disorderings: of difference, of confidently centred identities, and of all forms of binary categorization" (107). As mentioned earlier it is radically open "for its interpretive insights and strategic power to be grasped and practiced" (107). In this novel Roy artistically uses thirdspace of Old Delhi city and the *hijra* Gharana *Khwabgah*, discovering the heterogeneity of transgender space and identity that intersects with religion, culture, and modernity. While explicating the pathetic condition and the position of the people devoid of a proper shelter in the society, Roy painfully makes a comparison to dogs suffering the same plight,

The smack addicts at the northern end of the graveyard – shadows just a deeper shade of night - huddled on knolls of hospital waste in a sea of old bandages and used syringes, didn't seem to notice her at all. On the southern side, clots of homeless people sat around fires cooking their meager, smoky meals. Stray dogs, in better health than the humans, sat at a polite distance, waiting politely for scrapes. (61)

Anjum was Aftab before experiencing city life as a spatial being which is not quite pleasant. Aftab "was a rare example of a Hermaphrodite, with both male and female characteristics" (Roy 16) whose "Hijra tendencies... (*Fitrat*)" (17) did not go away as his parents assumed. Since his regular space of home and school did not accept the queerness of his gendered identity as they ridiculed him 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), he had to find alternative spaces for people like him moving away from the spaces of conformity.

One spring morning, Aftab saw a tall, slim-hipped woman wearing bright lipstick, gold high heels and a shiny, green satin salwar kameez buying bangles from Mir the bangle-seller... Aftab had never seen anybody like the tall woman with lipstick...He wanted to be her. He followed her down the street all the way to Turkman Gate and stood for a long time outside the blue doorway she disappeared into. (Roy 18)

Aftab's choice of space for living is true to his gender identity as he leaves his house for "the blue doorway of the house Gali Dakotan...the Khwabgah- the House of Dream" (Roy 19) at the age of fifteen, "it was the only 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" (Roy 19). When he entered the ordinary broken-down haveli Khwabgah he felt "as though he were walking through the gates of Paradise" (Roy 20).

The dilapidated condition of the living space of the house is representative of the marginalization of gender minorities like *hijras* in contemporary society. However, this is the only space in the city that would accommodate a *hijra* who wants to explore and be true to his gender identity. Aftab and other *hijras* like "Bombay Silk, Bulbul, Razia, Heera, Baby, Nimmo, Mary and Guria" (Roy 19) live under their Ustad or guru Kulsoom Bi. They consider the world outside their living space as "Duniya" and "the Khwabgah was called Khwabgah... because it was where special people, *blessed* people, came with their dreams that could not be realized in the Duniya. In the Khwabgah, Holy Souls trapped in the wrong bodies were liberated" (Roy 53). As a thirdspace Khwabgah witnesses Aftab evolving into Anjum who gradually realizes "the Khwabgah was just as complicated if not more so, than the Duniya" (Roy 27). She lives there "with her patched-together body and her partially realized dreams for more than thirty years" (Roy 29) before leaving for the heterotopic space of the cemetery. The relegated existence of Anjum is described in the following words by Roy,

She didn't turn to see which small boy had thrown a stone at her, didn't crane her neck to read the insults scratched into her bark. When people called her names - clown without a circus, queen without a palace - she let the hurt blow through her branches like a breeze and used the music of her rustling leaves as balm to ease her pain. (Roy 3)

Similarly, the space of Old Delhi city is the lived thirdspace where transgender people like Anjum interact and negotiate as the 'Other' who is excluded by violence, humiliation, and ignorance from the ordinary way of life as stated by Massey, "From the symbolic meaning of spaces/places and the gendered messages which they transmit to the straightforward exclusion by violence, spaces and places are not only themselves gendered but, in their being so, they both reflect and affect the ways in which gender is constructed and understood" (197). Roy's portrayal of the city of Delhi as a woman, a living being itself is a representation of the thirdspace. She calls Delhi a "Thousand-year-old sorceress...her Medusa skull... loose, parchment skin" (Roy 96), whose "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” (Roy 96). The living condition of the *hijras* was shown to be so bad by Roy in the novel that even after their death they are not spared from getting ridiculed. On being asked about the procedure of cremation of the *hijras* by an Imam, the following retort by Anjum shows how vehemently she displeases the subservient attitude,

You tell me...You're the Imam Sahib, not me. Where do old birds go to die? Do they fall on us like stones from the sky? Do we stumble on their bodies in the streets? Do you not think that the All-seeing, Almighty One who put us on this Earth has made proper arrangements to take us away? (Roy 5)

Anjum and other *hijras* defy the gender binarism of this public space by being blatantly true to their gender identity and thus define their spatial identity as *hijra* in the cityspace, “She refused to refer herself as anything other than Hijra” (Roy 83). At Jantar Mantar when the documentary makers film ‘Protest and Resistance,’ they ask Anjum to talk about the possibility of another world without any knowledge of Anjum’s lexicon of the ‘Duniya’ as she says “‘Hum doosri Duniya se aaye hain,’...which meant: We’ve come from there... from the other world” (Roy 110). Upon finding the abandoned baby girl (Miss Udaya Jebeen) when the crowd hears Anjum’s fluent Urdu they are intimidated by her, “It was at odds with the class they assumed she came from” (Roy 119). Anjum and her friend Ishrat are even questioned as “Who gave these hijras permission to sit here? Which of these struggles do they belong to?” (Roy 119) by Mr. Aggarwal, one of the leaders of the anti-corruption movement at Jantar Mantar which “is a space for serious politics, not a circus ring” (Roy 121).

The confrontation between Anjum and Mr. Aggarwal over the baby is one of the striking incidents in the context of the Delhi city as the thirdspace of the transgenders and how they are perceived by the ordinary citizens who believe the public space is for socially acknowledged ‘normal’ people only. Ishrat’s involvement in this incident is one of the Hijra ways of “intervening in the practiced way that only Hijras knew how to when it came to protecting each other--- by making a declaration of war and peace at the same time... she started the spread-fingered Hijra clap and began to dance, moving her hips obscenely, swirling her chunni, her outrageous, aggressive sexuality aimed at humiliating Mr. Aggarwal” (Roy 123). The reaction of those city people to Anjum and people like her is reflected in their denial of providing the space to the Hijras. The city space is thus explicitly revealed in the connection between people as spatial beings and their gendered identity.

Conclusion

Roy in this novel explores the relationship between space and the transgender as manifested in the incorporation of heterotopia and thirdspace as revealed through Anjum’s varied experiences. Her queerness complicates her spatial experiences as revealed in this study. Her gender affiliation imposes a restrictive marginality on her identity as depicted in the novel which effectively captures the struggles and challenges of transgenders. In portraying the denial of legitimized conformed space to the protagonist, the novel itself emerges as a space, which in the words of Soja, “speaks and

critiques through its otherness” (61) while resisting and challenging the hegemony of conformist socio-cultural practices and providing in the process, equal space and representation to all the marginalized others of the society. Literature thus acquires agency in envisioning the interrelationship of space and gender, and the socio-cultural depiction of these mechanisms as mirrored in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*.

Roy does not shy away from portraying the ill-treatment meted out to the transgenders in our country which relegate both their inner and outer space as individuals to a subordinate position. Externally, if it is the marginalized position that deprives the *hijras* of authentic identity in the society, internally, it is the contemplation of the subordinations in the mind that further bog them down. The secondary position of the inner space of an individual can really be detrimental because “an inner space is often also experienced as unsafe.... The inner space can, for instance, be experienced as confinement, while the outer space represents liberation and, consequently, security” (Bal 134).

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