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Cartographies of Unbelonging: Minority Stress and the Psychosocial Precarity of Transgender Individuals in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

S. Charumathi [1], Dr. K. A. Agalya[2]

[1] Research Scholar, Department of English, Sri Vasavi College, Erode.
[2] Assistant Professor, Department of English, Sri Vasavi College, Erode.

ABSTRACT

This paper interrogates the intersection of transgender marginalization, psychosocial distress, and social exclusion in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) through the analytical framework of Minority Stress Theory. Centring on Anjum, a transgender woman whose existence unsettles normative constructions of gender, kinship, and social belonging, the study examines how heteronormative expectations and entrenched social prejudices produce conditions of vulnerability, alienation, and psychological strain. Drawing upon the distinction between external minority stressors, including discriminatory encounters and social rejection, and internal processes associated with persistent stigma, the paper investigates the cumulative consequences of living within a social order that renders gender-diverse identities precarious and marginal. Rather than locating distress within transgender identity itself, this analysis situates psychosocial vulnerability within the structures that regulate gendered legitimacy and restrict access to recognition and belonging. Furthermore, Anjum's association with the hijra community and her establishment of the Jannat Guest House are examined as counterspaces in which alternative kinship networks, collective care, and self-affirmation challenge dominant regimes of exclusion. By bringing literary representation into dialogue with Minority Stress Theory, this study argues that Roy's narrative exposes the psychological costs of institutionalised stigma while foregrounding the possibilities of resilience and communal belonging. Ultimately, the paper contends that transgender inclusion requires more than symbolic visibility; it necessitates a fundamental reconsideration of the social norms and exclusionary practices through which gendered identities are devalued and marginalised.

Keywords: Minority Stress Theory, psychosocial distress, gendered precarity, social stigma Psychosocial marginalization.

Introduction

Arundhati Roy is an Indian novelist, essayist, and political commentator whose literary and non-fictional works critically engage with social inequality, political power, and the experiences of marginalized communities. She achieved international recognition with her debut novel, The God of Small Things (1997), which received the Booker Prize. Her second novel, The Ministry of Utmost Happiness (2017), extends her literary engagement with social and political realities through a complex narrative that brings together diverse lives shaped by caste, religion, gender, and political conflict. Roy's narrative approach foregrounds individuals who exist at the margins of dominant social structures, challenging conventional distinctions between belonging and exclusion. Rather than treating marginalization as an isolated personal experience, her writing situates individual lives within broader structures of social inequality and institutional power. In The Ministry of Utmost Happiness, this perspective becomes particularly significant through the representation of Anjum, a transgender woman whose experiences illuminate the relationship between gender identity, social recognition, and the struggle for human dignity.

Published in 2017, The Ministry of Utmost Happiness is a multifaceted novel that interweaves personal histories with the political and social tensions of contemporary India. The narrative begins with Anjum, who is assigned the name Aftab at birth and later lives as a woman within the hijra community in Delhi. Her journey unfolds through experiences of familial tension, social marginalization, violence, and the search for an environment in which she can establish a sense of belonging. Following traumatic experiences, Anjum leaves the Khwabgah, the community residence associated with her earlier life, and establishes the Jannat Guest House in a graveyard. This space gradually develops into a refuge for individuals who have been displaced, rejected, or excluded from conventional social life. Alongside Anjum's story, the novel follows S. Tilottama and other characters whose lives are entangled with political violence, religious conflict, and social injustice. Through its interwoven narrative structure, Roy challenges the assumption that social institutions necessarily provide protection, acceptance, or security to everyone. The novel's significance for transgender studies lies particularly in its exploration of how gender-diverse individuals negotiate identity and belonging within a society governed by normative expectations. Anjum's life thus offers a literary perspective through which the relationship between social prejudice, emotional vulnerability, and the search for community can be critically examined.

The history of transgender people in India reflects a long and complex journey shaped by cultural traditions, social attitudes, colonial laws, and struggles for equal rights. Transgender people are individuals whose gender identity differs from the sex assigned to them at birth. In India, the term hijra refers to a historically established community with its own cultural practices, social relationships, and traditions. However, the hijra community represents only one part of the broader transgender population. The history of transgender people cannot be understood through a single experience because their lives have differed according to region, religion, caste, class, and social circumstances. Although gender-diverse identities have existed for centuries, their existence has not always guaranteed social acceptance, equal treatment, or freedom from discrimination.

In ancient India, references to gender diversity appeared in religious texts, literary traditions, stories, and cultural practices. Some historical texts recognised categories of gender that did not fit neatly into conventional male and female classifications. These references demonstrate that ideas about gender in the Indian subcontinent were not always identical to modern understandings of gender. However, it would be incorrect to assume that all transgender people were accepted or enjoyed equal rights during this period. Their social positions varied according to cultural beliefs and local practices. Certain individuals and communities held religious or ceremonial roles, while others may have experienced social restrictions. Therefore, the early history of gender diversity presents a complex picture of cultural recognition alongside possible forms of exclusion. The existence of gender-diverse identities in historical traditions also challenges the assumption that such identities are entirely new to Indian society.

In present-day India, transgender people continue to face challenges involving family relationships, education, employment, healthcare, public safety, and social acceptance. Some experience rejection from their families because their gender identity conflicts with traditional expectations. Others encounter ridicule, misgendering, harassment, or exclusion in educational institutions and workplaces. Such experiences can restrict their opportunities and create feelings of isolation and insecurity. Economic exclusion may further increase their vulnerability by limiting access to stable income, suitable housing, and healthcare. However, transgender people should not be represented only as victims of discrimination. They demonstrate agency, resilience, creativity, and the ability to establish supportive communities. Community networks can provide emotional support, shared resources, and a sense of belonging when conventional family and social structures fail to offer acceptance. Understanding both the difficulties and the resilience of transgender communities is essential to presenting their experiences accurately.

This historical background provides an important foundation for examining transgender representation in literature. In Arundhati Roy's The Ministry of Utmost Happiness (2017), the character Anjum offers a literary perspective on gender identity, social exclusion, and the search for belonging. Her experiences can be examined in relation to the wider historical and social conditions affecting transgender communities in India. Minority Stress Theory provides a useful framework for analysing how prejudice, discrimination, rejection, and the anticipation of future hostility can create additional psychological pressure for members of marginalised groups. From this perspective, the distress experienced by transgender individuals does not arise from their identity itself but from the social environments in which their identities are judged and devalued. Anjum's relationships with the hijra community and her establishment of the Jannat Guest House also allow the study to consider the importance of alternative kinship, collective care, and social acceptance. By connecting the historical marginalisation of transgender communities with Anjum's experiences, this research examines how Roy's novel represents the continuing struggle for dignity, recognition, and meaningful social inclusion.

THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

Minority Stress Theory provides the theoretical foundation for examining the relationship between transgender identity, social stigma, and psychological distress in Arundhati Roy's The Ministry of Utmost Happiness. The framework is associated with Virginia Brooks's early work on minority stress among lesbian women and was further developed by psychologist Ilan H. Meyer, particularly in his influential 2003 article, "Prejudice, Social Stress, and Mental Health in Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Populations." Meyer explains that prejudice, discrimination, and stigma create stressful social environments that can adversely affect the well-being of marginalised individuals. The theory distinguishes minority stress from the ordinary challenges of everyday life because it arises specifically from social prejudice and the disadvantaged position assigned to a minority group. Subsequent scholarship has extended this framework to transgender and gender-diverse populations, including experiences of gender-based discrimination and the denial of recognition. In this study, Minority Stress Theory is used to examine Anjum's experiences as a transgender woman within the social and cultural environment represented in Roy's novel. Anjum's encounters with gender-based prejudice, social exclusion, and the struggle for acceptance can be analysed as possible manifestations of external minority stress. The study can then investigate how the novel represents the emotional consequences of these experiences, including alienation, insecurity, and the search for belonging. Such interpretations must be supported by specific passages from the text rather than inferred solely from Anjum's transgender identity. The Jannat Guest House also provides an important perspective for examining community support, alternative kinship, and the creation of a space in which marginalised individuals can develop relationships beyond conventional social boundaries. Through this framework, the paper argues that the difficulties represented in Anjum's life are not inherent to transgender identity; they must instead be understood in relation to the prejudice and exclusion encountered within her social environment.

ANALYSIS

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].The line illustrates how transgender identity becomes a target of ridicule when people insist on interpreting gender through rigid, binary categories. The repeated expressions, such as "he-she" and "she-he," reduce gender identity to a source of amusement rather than treating it as a legitimate aspect of a person's existence. The mocking repetition and laughter, "hee! hee! hee!", intensify the humiliating tone. Instead of attempting to understand the person being discussed, the speaker turns their identity into a spectacle. The line therefore reveals how language can be used to deny dignity, reinforce social boundaries, and make transgender people feel that their

identities are unacceptable within the surrounding community. Through Minority Stress Theory, this incident can be interpreted as an external minority stressor, in which verbal humiliation reinforces stigma and communicates that transgender identities are socially unacceptable. Repeated exposure to such ridicule may contribute to shame, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and social isolation. Furthermore, anticipating similar treatment can make transgender individuals feel unsafe in everyday interactions, potentially leading them to avoid hostile environments or conceal aspects of their identity for self-protection. The psychological burden arises not from transgender identity itself but from persistent prejudice and the fear of rejection. Thus, Roy's portrayal illustrates how discriminatory language can become a source of psychological distress, demonstrating the relationship between social stigma, gender-based humiliation, and the marginalization of transgender individuals.

Who today knew that there had been times when all of them, including she, Ustad Kulsoom Bi herself, had been driven to begging for alms at traffic lights? That they had built themselves up, bit by bit, humiliation by humiliation, from there?[Roy 53]. The line exposes the gap between society's superficial perceptions of transgender individuals and the difficult realities underlying their everyday existence. Through these rhetorical questions, Roy challenges the ignorance of ordinary people who judge hijra communities without understanding the discipline, sacrifices, and persistent struggles required to survive in a society that frequently denies them acceptance. The reference to Anjum and Ustad Kulsoom Bi being driven to beg for alms at traffic lights reveals the economic vulnerability and social exclusion that can restrict transgender individuals' access to secure employment and independent living. The statement that they "had built themselves up, bit by bit, humiliation by humiliation, from there" is particularly significant because it presents their progress as a gradual process achieved despite repeated experiences of degradation. The phrase "humiliation by humiliation" emphasises the cumulative nature of their suffering, suggesting that their lives are shaped not by a single discriminatory incident but by repeated encounters with prejudice, rejection, and social disrespect. Through the lens of Minority Stress Theory, these experiences can be interpreted as external minority stressors arising from social stigma, discrimination, and unequal access to economic opportunities. Persistent exposure to such conditions may contribute to psychological distress, including anxiety, frustration, shame, emotional exhaustion, and a diminished sense of security. When individuals are repeatedly treated as inferior or denied opportunities because of their gender identity, they may become increasingly conscious of how others perceive them and begin anticipating rejection even before entering unfamiliar social environments. This constant anticipation of humiliation can make ordinary activities emotionally demanding, as transgender individuals may feel compelled to remain alert to possible insults, exclusion, or mistreatment. Economic insecurity can further intensify this psychological pressure because the struggle to obtain basic necessities leaves fewer opportunities for stability, independence, and emotional security. Their resilience should not be interpreted as evidence that discrimination causes little harm; rather, it demonstrates the effort required to withstand and overcome exclusion. Through Minority Stress Theory, Roy's portrayal illustrates that psychological suffering does not arise from transgender identity itself but from the accumulated pressures of stigma, economic marginalisation, and anticipated rejection. Ultimately, the passage challenges readers to recognise the human cost of social prejudice and to understand that behind the public image of hijra communities lie individual experiences of vulnerability, determination, and the continuing struggle for dignity, security, and belonging.

CONCLUSION

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* exposes a disturbing contradiction in society: transgender individuals are frequently expected to prove their humanity, tolerate humiliation, and demonstrate resilience in circumstances that society itself has helped create. Through Anjum and the hijra community, this study argues that transgender marginalisation extends beyond visible discrimination into the psychological burden of anticipating rejection, negotiating safety, and struggling to secure an ordinary sense of belonging. Viewed through Minority Stress Theory, the novel reveals how repeated humiliation, social exclusion, and economic insecurity may accumulate into a persistent form of distress that cannot be understood by examining individual discriminatory incidents in isolation. The first significant thing of this research is that humiliation functions as a cumulative social experience rather than an isolated insult: every act of ridicule or rejection can reinforce the expectation that another hostile encounter may follow. Consequently, even spaces that should offer security may become sources of anxiety when acceptance remains uncertain. The second thing is that society often celebrates transgender resilience while ignoring the injustice that makes resilience necessary. Anjum's determination to rebuild her life demonstrates strength, but her strength must not become an excuse for society to withdraw its responsibility to provide safety, opportunity, and recognition. The third thing is that economic exclusion intensifies psychological marginalisation. When transgender people are denied fair access to employment, housing, education, and healthcare, discrimination becomes more than an emotional wound; it becomes a material barrier that restricts independence and narrows future possibilities. Anjum's Jannat Guest House becomes significant because it creates a space in which relationships, care, and belonging can be established beyond conventional social boundaries. Nevertheless, such spaces should complement, rather than replace, transgender people's right to participate safely in mainstream society. These suggest that meaningful change requires a redistribution of responsibility: families must replace rejection with acceptance; schools and colleges must actively prevent gender-based humiliation; employers must provide equal opportunities; healthcare institutions must ensure respectful, accessible treatment; and governments must strengthen the implementation of anti-discrimination protections. Public education should also challenge the everyday language, stereotypes, and assumptions through which transgender identities are reduced to objects of ridicule. Importantly, psychological support must be accessible without treating transgender identity itself as a problem; the focus should instead include the distress produced by prejudice, insecurity, and exclusion. This research ultimately proposes a shift from teaching transgender people how to survive an intolerant society to transforming society so that survival does not require extraordinary endurance. Roy's novel encourages readers to recognise that inclusion is not achieved merely by allowing marginalised individuals to exist at the edges of social life; it requires acknowledging their equal right to dignity, security, opportunity, and meaningful relationships. Therefore, the true measure of social progress is not how much humiliation transgender individuals can withstand, but how effectively families, institutions, and communities eliminate the conditions that produce it. By exposing the psychological consequences of exclusion alongside the possibilities of alternative belonging, the novel makes a compelling case for a society in which transgender people are not merely tolerated as exceptions but respected as equal participants in human life.

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