



Queer Marginalities And The Nation-State: Gender, Sexuality And Homo-Nationalism In Arundhati Roy's "The Ministry Of Utmost Happiness"

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This paper explores the complex intersections of gender, sexuality and homo-nationalism in Indian English fiction through a critical analysis of Arundhati Roy's "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness (2017)". Engaging with queer theoretical frameworks, particularly Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity and Jasbir Puar's concept of homo-nationalism, the study examines how the Indian nation-state selectivity incorporates certain queer identities to project an image of progressiveness while continuing to marginalize others who do not conform to dominant cultural, religious and political norms.

The novel's central character, Anjum a hijra born as Aftab, serves as a powerful challenge to rigid gender binaries and heteronormative definitions of citizenship while hijras occupy a visible cultural position in Indian society, Roy reveals the contradiction symbolic recognition and lived exclusion, exposing how gender non-conforming bodies remain vulnerable to social violence and state neglect. The paper argues that Roy resists homo-nationalist narratives that celebrate legal reforms or urban queer visibility by foregrounding lives marked by precarity, displacement and political repression.

By situating queerness alongside issues of religion, communal violence, caste hierarchies and militarization, particularly in relation to Muslim identity and the Kashmir conflict, the novel underscores the intersectional nature of marginalization in contemporary India. The Jannat Guest House, established in a graveyard emerges as an alternative space of belonging that challenges nationalist and heteronormative frameworks by reimagining kinship, care and community beyond the logic of the nation-state.

The study concludes that "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness" offers a radical critique of Homo-nationalism and advocates for an inclusive, intersectional understanding of gender and sexuality that moves beyond conditional national acceptance.

Keywords: Gender, Sexuality, Homo-Nationalism, Indian English fiction, Queer Theory.

Introduction

Arundhati Roy's "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness" is an ambitious narrative that traverses decades of Indian political history, intertwining personal lives with national trauma. From the Emergency to the Kashmir conflict, the novel maps how the nation-state produces zones of exclusion- geographical, political and physical. Among the most radical interventions of the text is its centering of queer and gender-nonconforming subjects, particularly the hijra community, whose existence unsettles the heteronormative foundations of nationalism.

This paper explores how Roy represents queer marginalities in relation to the nation-state, arguing that the novel critiques both overt exclusion and more subtle forms of inclusion that operate through homonationalism. While contemporary states increasingly claim progressiveness through selective recognition of queer identities, Roy demonstrates that such inclusion often demands conformity and erases those who cannot or will not assimilate. The novel thus exposes how gender and sexuality become sites through which nationalism is consolidated and contested.

Theoretical Framework: Queer Theory, Nationalism, and Homo-Nationalism

Queer theory challenges the assumption that gender and sexuality are stable, natural, or universal categories. Scholars such as Judith Butler argue that gender is performative, constituted through repeated social acts rather than biological determinism. This destabilization of fixed identity categories is crucial for understanding Roy's representation of hijra and queer characters, whose lives resist binary classification.

Nationalism, as theorized by Benedict Anderson, constructs the nation as an "imagined community", sustained through shared narratives, symbols, and norms. However, this imagination often relies on exclusion- those who do not conform to normative ideals of gender, sexuality, religion, or caste are positioned as threats to national coherence.

Jasbir Puar's concept of homo-nationalism is particularly useful here. Homo-nationalism refers to the alignment of certain LGBTQ+ identities with nationalist ideologies, where limited forms of queerness are incorporated to project modernity, while racialized, gender-nonconforming, or non-assimilable queer subjects remain marginalized. Roy's novel anticipates and critiques this dynamic by highlighting how recognition without structural change reproduces inequality.

Hijra Identity and the Limits of National Belonging

The character of Anjum (born Aftab) stands at the emotional and ideological center of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. As a hijra, Anjum exists outside the male/female binary that underpins state institutions, legal frameworks, and social stigma, illustrating how non-normative bodies are disciplined from birth.

Anjum's movement to the Khwabgah- a communal space for hijras-represents an alternative social formation that exists in tension with the nation-state. The Khwabgah operates as a counter-public, where kinship is not based on blood or reproduction but on care, survival, and shared marginalization. In centering this space, Roy challenges nationalist ideals that privilege heterosexual family structures as the foundation of citizenship.

Despite constitutional recognition of a "third gender" in India, Roy's narrative suggests that legal acknowledgement does not dismantle social violence. Anjum's experience during the Gujarat riots, where her Muslim identity compounds her vulnerability, reveals how queer marginality intersects with religious and communal violence. The nation-state's promise of protection collapses in moments of crisis, exposing the fragility of conditional belonging.

Gender, Sexuality, and State Violence

Violence in the novel is not merely physical but structural and symbolic. The state regulates bodies through law, surveillance and militarization, particularly in conflict zones such as Kashmir. Roy draws parallels between the occupation of territory and the occupation of bodies, suggesting that the logic of nationalism depends on control and exclusion.

Queer bodies, especially those that are visibly non-conforming, are rendered hyper-visible yet politically invisible. They become targets of ridicule, assault, and erasure, while simultaneously being excluded from narratives of national heroism and sacrifice. Roy's depiction of such violence underscores how nationalism relies on rigid gender norms to maintain order and legitimacy.

The novel also critiques liberal narratives of progress that celebrate tolerance without addressing systematic injustice. Selective inclusion- such as token recognition of queer identities-serves to obscure ongoing violence against those who exist at the intersections of queerness, religion, caste and class.

Homo-Nationalism and the Politics of Inclusion

Although *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* does not explicitly address Homo-Nationalism, its critique aligns closely with Puar's framework. Roy exposes how the state's embrace of diversity is often superficial, accommodating only those queer subjects who can conform to middle-class, apolitical, and gender-normative ideals.

Queer characters who resist assimilation- through non-binary identities, unconventional kinship, or political dissent- remain outside the boundaries of acceptable citizenship. Roy thus challenges celebratory narratives of queer progress, emphasizing that visibility without justice reproduces hierarchies rather than dismantling them.

The novel's refusal to offer neat resolutions reinforces this critique. Queer survival, in Roy's world, is provisional and contingent, shaped by ongoing negotiation with structures of power.

Alternative Imaginaries and Queer Resistance

Despite its bleak portrayal of violence and exclusion, the novel also imagines spaces of resistance. Anjum's creation of the Jannat Guest House in the graveyard symbolizes an alternative vision of community- one that embraces the discarded, the dead and the unwanted. This space rejects the Nation-State's obsession with purity, productivity and futurity.

Roy's emphasis on chosen families and affective bonds aligns with queer critiques of reproductive nationalism. By valuing care over conformity, the novel proposes an ethics of belonging rooted in vulnerability and mutual recognition rather than identity policing.

Narrative Form as Queer Aesthetic

The formal structure of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* itself performs a critique of linear, teleological narratives associated with nation-building. The novel's sprawling, non-linear storytelling resists coherence in the service of a singular national myth. Instead, it waves multiple narratives, voices, and temporalities, undermining the homogenizing logic of nationalist historiography.

This aesthetic mirrors queer theory's challenge to normative temporality and narrative. As Munoz argues, queerness often disrupts conventional progress narratives, introducing dissonance, latency, and counter-histories (Munoz 1999). Roy's fragmented narrative structure parallels a queer sensibility that refuses singular resolution. The novel's refusal to center a single protagonist or linear plot reflects its resistance to nationalist totalizing. Instead, it embraces multiplicity, contradiction and heterogeneity- qualities that resonate with queer theoretical commitments to destabilizing normative categories.

Conclusion

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness offers a powerful critique of the nation-state through its engagement with queer marginalities. By foregrounding gender-nonconforming and queer lives, Roy exposes the heteronormative and exclusionary foundations of nationalism and questions the promises of liberal inclusion. The novel's interrogation of homo-nationalism reveals how selective recognition can coexist with systemic violence.

Ultimately, Roy invites readers to reimagine political belonging beyond the rigid frameworks of the nation-state. Her queer characters do not seek assimilation into dominant structures but instead create alternative worlds in the margins- worlds that challenge the very logic of exclusion on which nationalism depends.

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