

Research Article

## Predicament of Anjum in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

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**Abstract:** Recent developments in gender studies and feminism have deconstructed the notion of gender and sexuality as innate, fixed, and stable categories. It has also questioned the binary division of sexes and the association of masculinity with male and femininity with female beings. With this development in the background, queer theory revisits the concepts of gender identity, gender expressions, and gender performance. It focuses on the constructed nature of these concepts and advocates recognition beyond established social and medical norms. For the first time in Indian English novels, we have an intersex person as the protagonist of the work, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* by Arundhati Roy. As a marginalized person, Anjum faces various challenges. The novel depicts her journey from Aftab to Anjum and the crisis she faces in her perception of gender and the gender role she is expected to perform. In this journey, she faces the dual war: the conflict within her and the conflict with social norms and the structure of society. She exerts her agency and embraces transsexuality at the cost of family ties and social acceptance. Her suffering does not end there. She remains an outcast and alienated from society. The novel has also shed light on the mentality of parents when they find their child to be different and deviant. The present paper delves into the character of the intersex in the light of queer theory, and it tries to explore and subvert the gender dynamic that suppresses and victimizes the marginalized.

**Keywords:** gender identity; gender expressions; gender performance; queer theory

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**Introduction**

Until the mid-twentieth century, it was an established assumption that there were only two sexes, namely male and female. These two sexes are binary opposites, and there is a one-to-one association between gender and sex. In fact, gender used to be a synonym of biological sex, and concepts like masculinity and femininity were considered as innate and inherent to the biological sex. Any deviation from these fixed categories was considered a pathological illness or disorder requiring treatment. The recent feminist and sociological studies have revisited the concept of gender. It has differentiated gender from sex by focusing on the constructed nature of gender. It has also questioned the binary categories of sex and the natural association of masculinity with male and femininity with female. Recent scientific studies have revealed that there are five sexes. The biologist Anne Fausto Sterling, in his essay, *The Five Sexes Revisited*, talked about the five types of sexes as they are: male, female, herm, merm, and ferm. Apart from male and female, the other three sexes possess both male and female characteristics in varying proportions. Further than this, recent feminist scientific studies have shown that there hardly exists a pure male or pure female category as such. The various patterns of chromosomes, hormones, and genitals exist differently in each individual's body, and they are not necessarily interlinked. Moreover, these patterns continuously change with changes in biological conditions. In this sense, gender ambiguity is not uncommon. With this scientific and sociological background, queer theory emerged, questioning heterosexuality and existing gender norms while advocating the rights of marginalized groups.

*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* portrays Anjum (formerly Aftab) as an intersex person. The novel depicts her struggle to perceive her gender identity, the conflict within her mind, the agency she exerts as she tries to establish her identity, and the challenges she must overcome to do so. The novel also depicts Anjum's alienation and suffering, as society rejects her for who she is and treats her differently from others. In this novel, Aftab is born intersex. Initially, the parents were overjoyed to have a male child, but when the mother came to know that the child had both genitals, it gave her a sense of shock and terror. Her initial feelings were recoil and disgust about the child, and she even contemplated killing the child. When she learned and accepted the fact that her child is 'Hijra', she felt terribly sad and anxious about the future of the child because she knew that there is no place in society for her child:

In Urdu, the only language she knew, all things, not just living things, but all things – carpets, clothes, books, pens, musical instruments had a gender. Everything was either masculine or feminine, man or woman—everything except her baby. Yes, of course, she knew there were words for those like him – Hijra and Kinner. However, two words do not make a language.

Was it possible to live outside a language? (8)

When the father came to know about the reality, he took the child to the doctor in order to fix him into one sex and erase the features of the other one. It is significant to notice that even medical practitioners suggested some pills and surgery as well to

categorize the child into the male sex. He also asked the father to suppress the tendencies of the other sex. Moreover, henceforth, the cultural project of inculcating manliness in Aftab (17) was set in motion. The parents started raising their child as a boy, but the child never found himself aligned with the gender he was raised in. Once he saw 'a tall woman with lipstick' passing through, and he suddenly felt fascinated with the way she was carrying herself, and he wanted to be her (17).

In the above sentence itself, we notice how he is trapped in a male body and how he earnestly feels an inner urge to be like the opposite sex. This is significant because it shows how the child perceives his gender differently and how he is supposed to perform differently. When the feeling of being trapped becomes unbearable, Aftab leaves home and joins the 'Khwabghar', the residence of the Hijra community. After entering Khwabghar, he feels as if he has entered paradise. He feels liberated. This was the place where he could be the way he wanted to be.

In this novel, the author offers a glimpse of the characters of other Hijras and depicts their struggles and disappointments. While discussing the struggles and challenges of the Hijra community, one of the Hijras reflects on how God has denied them happiness and how they are continuously at war with themselves.

'Indo-Pak war – outside things that settle down eventually. However, for us, the price rise, school admissions, beating husbands, and cheating wives are all inside us. The riot is inside us. The war is inside us. It will never settle down. It can't.' (23)

This quote represents the identity conflict every transgender person faces. Aftab was also not an exception to this. Aftab considered himself female. He expressed his gender in a feminine way, but as he grew up, his body started showing the signs of masculinity. He became tall and masculine. Hair started growing on his body and his face. This was something he hated. He felt as if his body was burying him. Then he realized the connotations of what Nimmo said - 'the war inside us' (23)

Aftab tried to wipe out the masculine traces on his body by shaving his hair, but his voice started breaking, and he could not do anything, though he tried to suppress it. This is how he continuously felt the conflict between the assigned gender and the gender he perceived as his. His gender expression did not align with his body's gender. Having a muscular body, he was forbidden to wear women's garments and bangles and to behave in a feminine way. Moreover, when he converted himself into a female by becoming Anjum, he was not allowed to have any male traces on her body. Anjum finds herself torn between. She becomes the victim of strict binary norms of the society, where intersex persons have to establish themselves as either completely male or female. Society does not accept intersex people for who they are. Neither family nor society treats them as normal human beings. They have to live separately, forming their own community, and society does not allow them to mingle.

Here, the researcher wants to establish how the process of embodiment for marginalized people differs from that of heterosexual people. Embodiment encompasses how gender shapes and is shaped by the body. It includes how people

experience their bodies and how those experiences shape their sense of identity. The process of embodiment operates at both internal and external levels. The sense of self emerges through the subject's continuous navigation, shaped by the interaction between the inner sense of self and validation from the immediate environment and society. For the common people, the process of embodiment is smooth because their sense of gender aligns with their gender expressions and the expectations of gender performance. Their sense of self is validated by the external environment, which enhances their self-assurance and confidence.

However, unfortunately, with the marginalized people like Anjum, embodiment does not happen smoothly because their sense of self does not align with the one that is assigned. Their embodiment is not a smooth, linear process. They perceive themselves differently, and they have to project or perform themselves differently. This leads to self-doubt, identity confusion, and ongoing conflict with oneself and with society. This further leads to emotional exhaustion and frustration. Even if they exert their willpower, their struggle and challenges do not end. A similar kind of feature is found in the character of Anjum as well. Her happiness in choosing her own life did not last long when she found herself torn between her body and her gender. She decided to go for surgery and take the treatment in order to align her genitals with the gender she feels. She went through the surgery, even though it was difficult and painful. After the surgery, she felt unburdened, but even then, she could not do anything with her masculine voice, and her dream to become wholly female remained partially unfulfilled.

Being a marginalized person, Anjum was alienated from society. She had left her family, as in the family environment, she was expected to perform a different gender role. She found the family system confining and therefore joined the Hijra community in order to liberate herself from the confinement she faced. Her father never met her afterward. The connection with her mother also began to weaken. She lost her home and could not stay with her mother, even for a single night, as it was unacceptable to the other family members. She started experiencing the feeling of loss and being disconnected from the world. When she used to tell the stories to her supposed daughter Zainab, the stories reflected her inner feelings – anxiety, fear, suffering, humiliation. So, instead of comforting, those stories used to make Zainab restless, keeping her awake all night.

The author has presented the bleak reality of the Hijra community's life. Anjum's life represents the marginalized community. One of the Hijras, Kulsoom Bi, reflects how people treat Hijras in a humiliating manner, how the bad rumors are spread about them, but in reality, nobody knows the kind of life they live throughout:

Ordinary people in the Dunia – what did they know about what it takes to live the life of a Hijra? What did they know about the rules, the discipline, and the sacrifices? Who today knew that there had been a time when all of them, including her, 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? (23)

At the age of forty-six, when Anjum decided to leave Khwabghar, she had no place to go and no one to give her shelter and warmth. The society had never accepted her as being one of them. It is significant to note that Hijras could not harbor simple dreams, ambitions, or desires as others could. After deciding to leave the community, Anjum wanted to go back to the ordinary world, which she calls 'Dunia'. She wanted to live a simple and uncomplicated life. She wanted to help people experiencing poverty, but it was her unrealistic and impractical wish that no poor person would ever feel willing to accept the help from Hijra. Her friend Meher rightly says, 'Arre, Doctor Sahib, which poor would want to be helped by us?' (56)

Her apparently casual question throws light on the forced isolation of the marginalized people from society. Finally, it was an 'unprepossessing graveyard' (58) where she found herself, an isolated place from the outer world. Her location itself suggests her alienation from Dunia, which she wanted to be a part of. She has to spend the rest of her life in a desolate way. She partially realizes her dream by serving the people in her community who were rejected and excluded from society. She builds a 'Jannat house' and calls her place 'the place of falling people'. Her agony is reflected in her statement: "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' (84)

If we analyze Anjum's character, we find her to be a very strong-willed person who has the guts to live the life she wants. She did not bother about what people would say or think about her and left her home in order to be liberated from the confinement of her body and the burden of the gender performance that was expected of her. Her journey is portrayed as tragic, full of struggle, challenges, identity conflict, suffering, humiliation, and isolation. Being marginalized, she has to go through all these things, which led to her fragmented personality. Society denied her an ordinary life. Her life has always been a battlefield of the wars she faced throughout – an internal war as well as one with society. Her character gives a tragic glimpse into the life of marginalized beings.

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