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Graveyards as Sanctuaries: Exploring Right to the City Spaces in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

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Abstract

Background: Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) examines urban spatiality by portraying marginalized characters navigating unjust constructs in city spaces such as Delhi and Kashmir.

Method: Employing the urban spatial theory and right to the city concept developed by Marxist Sociologist Henri Lefebvre, this paper delves into the main characters, Anjum and Tilo, who become the leaders of their marginalized communities.

Result: The complexities of contemporary India, characterized by a diverse population living under social injustice and political violence, persist in the growing urban space and fight for their right to city space.

Conclusion: Marginalized communities show strong resistance and strive to prove their existence in the grand city spaces. The disregarded hubs mark their territory in the politically commercialized cities.

Novelty: The paper promotes a nascent view of Roy's spatial confrontation, which reinvents urbanity as a contested concept where previously disregarded existences regain visibility. This paper scrutinizes the city as a social and spatial product in prominent South Asian cities, such as Delhi.

Keywords: City Space, urban space, right to the city, graveyard

Introduction

Arundhati Roy's second novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), weaves a compelling narrative investigating the intricate interplay between city spaces and marginalized identities in Delhi, a highly urban space in India. The first part of the story is primarily set in Delhi, and the latter is in Kashmir. The paper draws on the experiences of a transgender

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individual, Anjum, who was born as Aftab and established a sanctuary called Jannat Guest House for those rejected in the city's public spaces. Through the characters' striving to claim physical and symbolic space within compelling urban realms, the novel critiques various issues that shape a city's space, including religious conflict, caste discrimination, gender identity, and state violence. The marginalized community is forced to turn available spaces in urban terrains, such as graveyards, into their homes informally, as Anjum does, to express their resistance against the normative social order.

Lefebvre (1996) has developed urban spatial theory and concept of "the right to the city" provide an interesting framework for analyzing Roy's novel. He argues that urban space is continuously shaped and reshaped through the interplay of city dwellers' experiences and that spatial contests both display and reinforce social inequalities. Through this theoretical lens, Anjum's establishment of Jannat Guest House in the graveyard represents a challenging action of the marginalized to confirm their right to the city. By examining Roy's characters through Lefebvre's framework, this paper aims to convey how their struggles and eccentricities transform city spaces, promoting acts of resistance against sociopolitical systems that seek to draw them out of the urban space.

City Spaces

This paper employs a qualitative research methodology, incorporating close textual evidence that highlights the city's spaces. This paper utilizes Lefebvre's concept of urban spaces (1996) and the rights to the city. He argues that urban space is incessantly shaped and reshaped through the interplay of experiences of city dwellers. This theory highlights the magnitude of understanding how spatial contests exhibit and reinforce social inequalities, as well as how individuals can shape and influence their urban spaces. Anjum's illegal yet visible establishment of the guest house aligns with Lefebvre's notion of urban spatial theory and the right to the city.

Contemporary Responses to the Novel

Roy's narrative is intense, intricate, and emotionally evocative. Anjum, with her torn identity as a Muslim "Hijra," and Tilo, with an eccentric personality, go through a horrible experience driven by the Indian political scenario. Roy delves into the issues of the partition of India, the Gujarat Riots, the Bhopal disaster, and the Kashmir Insurgency, building an intricate yet captivating narrative. As their fates intertwine, characters experience a roller-coaster narrative, sharing common trauma triggered by historical, social, and political frictions.

Aftab's introduction as the beloved boy of the family quickly becomes tarnished after his mother discovers that the girl's part is hidden behind his private parts. His masculine body, with a feminine heart, finds refuge in "Khwabgah," a shelter for those disregarded by the normative society. Jadoon (2024) writes, "The birth of Aftab–turned–Anjum is one of the major incidents through which the idea of happiness is implicitly hinted at" (p. 6). She can create her own "Anjum's Kingdom" (p. 6). Jadoon (2024) notes, "Anjum rules happily over the old cemetery, which turns into a residential hub of the ones 'fallen out or been expelled' from

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Duniya" (p. 6). With her happiness constantly tested by society, Anjum dares to reveal her hidden self and constructs a concrete space in the graveyard, affirming her existence.

Roy talks about marginalized communities and their eccentric representatives. The novel "presents the shattered stories of misfits and weirdos" (Aryal, 2022, p.78). "The marginal people are suppressed under the socio-political structure of the government, guided by the Hindu ideology in the novel" (p. 78). These characters are denied physical space and acceptance. Aryal (2022) notes that the novel "elicits the struggles and suppression of the minority groups and transgender individuals" (p. 82). Thus, themes of marginal resistance are explicitly presented in the novel.

Political issues and the Indo-Pak conflict remain at the heart of Roy's narrative. Anjum returns to Khwabgah, being psychologically tormented after experiencing the horrific Gujarat riots. Tilo comes out with a similar kind of trauma after experiencing tragedies in Kashmir. Barta (2017) writes that the novel is "a political novel by all accounts, as it refers to political personages, but more than that, it has the political issues at its core which trigger most action" (p. 429). Political conflict sparks violence and chaos in the characters' lives. "Her selection includes the state of emergency imposed in India, the insurgency that rocked Punjab, the 1984 anti-Sikh riots, the Union Carbide Gas Tragedy, Gujrat riots of 2002, anti-Dalit events, 9/11, Maoist insurgency, displacement of people due to the building of dams and other issues" (Barta, 2017, p. 431).

Roy presents the story of the oddballs and the nonconformists. Transgender themes are at the center of the novel. "Gendered spaces are physical or symbolic areas where particular genders are accepted while others are marginalized or excluded" (Gopaladhas, 2025, p. 84). Satris (2018) comments on the novel as "a mix of the high and low", where "One is the band of misfits gathered around Anjum, who was born a hermaphrodite in Old Delhi and ran full speed toward the theatrical femininity of India's hijra—transgender community" (2018, p.14). Additionally, the novel highlights the experiences of Tilo, who strive to fit into the heteronormative expectations of India while creating and celebrating their uniqueness.

Roy's stylistic language incorporates quotations in Hindi and Urdu, as well as famous Bollywood songs and poems. These entities, as Kalpana (2018) writes, "appear to bring the base human emotions to the fore, in all their entirety and dimensions" (p. 19). Anjum and Tilo desperately want to experience motherhood. "Motherhood" (Khatun, 2022, p. 31) in the novel transcends the traditional concept of bearing a child. The novel explores various versions of societal roles, resulting in fluidity within the traditional concept of womanhood and motherhood. Subaltern issues are at the heart of the novel's significant characters. Jahan (2021) writes, "Roy has always punctuated the proliferating gap between the powerful and the powerless in contemporary India" (p. 2). "The issue of "Untouchability" as well as the question of the subaltern, arose with the entrance of Saddam as the social structure permitted him to express his limits. Thus, themes of the oppressed and marginalized at the center of the novel present subaltern experiences.

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The centralization of the necropolis space in Delhi presents the continuous search of jilted members for a realm where they can relate and find a sense of home. Essa (2021) writes that the characters "… seek refuge, forge connections, and create homes nearby or even directly in spaces that seem far from homely: graveyards" (2021, p. 745). The recent literature has incorporated diverse themes and critical perspectives on Roy's novel. However, this paper explores city spaces through the lens of urban spatial theory proposed by Lefebvre (1996). Lefebvre conjectures that urban space is not only a concrete space but also a social product modeled by power relations and social practices. This paper proposes further research into the representation of city spaces, focusing on the dynamics of spatial practices and urban transformations, and invites additional investigation into contemporary South Asian City Studies.

Roy's Narrative as the Right to the City

Roy opens the novel with a note that shows the dystopian city through the allegory of animals and birds after sunset. Her note addresses different time zones and diverse characters in various cities, with their stories of struggle worthy of being sketched into a whole new novel. Roy introduces us to the main character, Anjum, who was previously Aftab and lives "in the graveyard behind the government hospital" (Roy, 2017, p. 4). "Khwabgah" (p. 8) in the novel becomes a space for dreams that is in stark contrast to the "Duniya" (p. 24), translated as the real world or the rest of the world. Anjum's journey from Duniya to Khwabgah marks the beginning of a chapter that explores her identity, her relationships with a homophobic world, and her desire to be a mother, ultimately creating her own home in Delhi. S. Tilottama is an educated woman whose life gets entangled with three male characters, Naga, Musa, and Biplab Das. Her story aligns with Anjum when she begins a hopeful life in the graveyard, sharing a homely space with others like her.

Jahanara Begum, Anjum's mother, was over the moon when she gave birth to Aftab, only to be crushed into the abyss of sadness after "she discovered, nestling underneath his boy-parts, a small, unformed, but undoubtedly girl-part" (Roy, 2017, p.7). "Yes, of course, she knew there was a word for those like him – Hijra. Two words actually, Hijra and Kinnar. But two words do not make a language" (p. 8). Even though her family tried to take medical help or Begum praying through the walls of the "dargah of Hazrat Sarmand Shaheed" (p. 9), Anjum was mesmerized by the doors of Khwabgah, of which was led to her, when she was he, by "No ordinary woman" (p. 18) who did not wear burqas and covered their body, but "she was dressed and walk the way she did only because she wasn't a woman" (p. 19), Aftab, learned about " haveli" (p. 19), which was known as "the Khwabgah – the House of Dreams" (p.19). Khwabgah becomes a city space that welcomes and provides a platform to create an identity for Hijras and other misfits feared by the homophobic city. "Anjum lived in the Khwabgah with her patched-together body and partially realized dreams for more than thirty years" (p. 29). Anjum informally adopts a three-year-old girl she finds roaming around Jama Masjid and brings her to Khwabgah, where she begins to nurture the baby as her own. Anjum begins to

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fulfill her motherly duties, taking care of Zainab, sending her to school, and catering to her needs.

This episode marks her journey in a city space, where she not only starts to make a home but also initiates building a family, a social institution essential in the city to achieve happiness. From a boy to a Hijra, to an informal mother, Anjum's story begins to consume a specific place in the city where there are city existences like Chadani Chwok, Dargahs, Masjids, Temples, and colonies, the old and new Delhi, the broken history of the magnificent city, Hindu city, a Muslim city, and many more but overall she becomes the part of the Hijra city. Anjum's visit to Ahmedabad with Zakir Mian changes her life, leaving a deep scar. As a mother, she wanted to "make an offering to Hazrat Gharib Nawaz in Zainab's name" (Roy, 2017, p. 44), but the hijras in the Khwabgah "had no news from Anjum, the news from Gujrat was horrible" (p. 44). Anjum experiences the gruesome Gujarat Riot where "Sixty Hindu pilgrims were burned alive," and "the police arrested hundreds of Muslims- all auxiliary Pakistanis from their point of view – from the area around the railway section under the new terrorism law and threw them in prison" (p. 44). Anjum and Mian suffered at the hands of Hindu extremists.

It was only when Mian's son in "a small refuge camp inside a mosque on the outskirts of Ahmedabad, where he found Anjum in the men's section, and brought her back to the Khwabgah" (p. 46). Mian was killed in the riot, but Anjum was spared, as killing a hijra was a crime no Hindu wanted to commit. After her return, she turned melancholic. She was no longer the hijra who wanted to dress up, care for Zainab, and give interviews to international media. Denied to go for a mental check-up, "the idea of leave took hold and coiled around her like a python" (p. 54). Her traumatic experience at the Gujarat Riots becomes a turning point in the novel.

Anjum now sought a place and peace where she did not have to answer to the head of Khwabgah Kulsoom Bi. The history of Khwabgah and the grandiosity mentioned by Bi did not appeal to her after her horrific trauma at the Duniya, where people, police, government, religions, faiths, and beliefs were killing each other. "Heartbroken, Anjum emptied her Godrej almirah and packed her finery – her satin ghararas and sequinned saris, her jhumkas, anklets, and glass bangles – into tin trunks" (Roy, 2017, p. 57). As the tempo arrived, she loaded her stuff and "left without saying where she was going" (p. 57). After leaving the first place that accepted her as a fit member, a whirl of emotions and melancholy ruled her being. "Only a ten-minute tempo ride from the Khwabgah, once again Anjum entered another world" (p. 57). She takes solace in the graveyard of the hospital and decides to live among the corpses and graves. Roy (2017) vividly pictures the cemetery as "an unprepossessing graveyard, run-down, not very big, and used only occasionally" (p. 58). The graveyard was located near the hospital mortuary, "where the bodies of the city's vagrants and unclaimed dead were warehoused until the police decided how to dispose of them" (p. 58). Anjum sought residence upon the graves of her intimate family members, some distant relatives, people from the hijra community, people from brothels, and her acquaintances from Duniya.

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Moving away from the house of dreams was a gradual step toward creating a space for herself and many to come. Till now, Anjum's existence has taken up three spaces in the city: her house in Shahjahanbad, her first dream mansion, Khwabgah, and the weirdest destination – the graveyard. The final one is her creation and her happy space that provides concrete ground for examining Anjum's spatial intervention and innovation, such as accessing the city spaces, reclaiming them, and making it a collective right of people who are constantly looking out a space in the grand city not only to settle but to aware about a collective consciousness that city spaces belong to everyone. This notion of urban spatial mindfulness and everybody's right to access the city, conceptualized by the prominent Marxist sociologist Henri Lefebvre, aligns with Anjum's right to the graveyard. Lefebvre advocated that city spaces are not just for those who have power and access; they also belong to the people of the margins. Delhi is the country's primary political hub, catering to cultural, economic, and commercial developments, as well as religious establishments. In the vast space, Anjum, a Muslim hijra, attempts to be a squatter on the graveyards, questioning how cities become urban spaces that constantly change, grow, and are restructured. Lefebvre (1996) asserts that citizens of the city collectively create, manage, build, and own space. As Lefebvre (1996) writes, "The right to the city, complemented by the right to difference and the right to information, should modify, concretize, and make more practical the rights of the citizen as an urban dweller (*citadin*) and user of multiple services" (p. 34). He affirms that "the right of users to make known their ideas on the space and time of their activities in the urban area; it would also cover the right to the use of the center, a privileged place, instead of being dispersed and stuck into ghettos (for workers, immigrants, the 'marginal' and even for the 'privileged' " (p. 34). Duniya does not accept Anjum's identity, so, according to Lefebvre's notion, she creates her authentic Duniya in the graveyard.

As Lefebvre suggested, she utilizes the urban space of the graveyard, which is "a ravaged, feral spectre" (Roy, 2017, p. 63). Anjum begins to reside in the cemetery for months and gets accustomed to the chilling yet calm environment. She stops grooming herself, and her "terrifyingness had its advantages though – it scared people and kept nasty, insult-hurling, stone-throwing little boys at bay" (p. 64). With the help of an old client, Mr. D. D Gupta, Anjum starts her first concrete venture at the graveyard and "constructs a small, temporary shack – nothing elaborate, just a storeroom in which she could lock her things if she needed to" (p. 65). Frequent visits from Zainab and other acquaintances made her graveyard lively, but the picture of "Zakir Mian, neatly folded, would not go away" (p. 66). Roy does not stop here: she develops Anjum's story in the city into a concrete space. Roy writes, "As the Fort of Desolation scaled down, Anjum's tin shack scaled up" (p. 66). Whenever municipal authorities came to question her, she replied that "she wasn't living in the graveyard, she was dying in it" (p. 67). No man could confront her as she began to construct walls over other graves. She began to "rent a couple of rooms to down-and-out travelers" (p. 68) and gave her house a formal name, "Jannat Guest House" (p. 68). Anjum becomes a typical city dweller as she "watched the news diligently and became an astute political analyst" (p. 68). Gradually, she began to have temporary guests, mainly hijras and others like them.

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The arrival of the permanent guest, Saddam Hussain, marked the beginning of the formal guest house. "He always greeted Anjum with affection and often ran little errands for her – buying her eggs and cigarettes (she trusted nobody with her vegetable shopping) or fetching a bucket of water from the pump on the days she had a backache" (Roy, 2017, p.73). He became the second man of the Jannat Guest House. Although marginalized, Saddam was a well-connected city dweller who had established contacts. He wants to make an existence in a city by owning urban spaces and creating economic and social relationships. The funeral parlor had every facility, but it would only accept the bodies that the "Duniya had rejected" (p. 80). Levfebre's "theory on the social construction of space and the right to the city" (Lelandais, 2014, p. 5) resonates with the character Saddam as he assists Anjum in navigating the guest house and making it a proper representation of a social construct, challenging the existing rudimentary hetero-societal principles. Lelandais (2014) writes about Lefebvre's idea of the individual's right to access the city spaces, "The political utopia of Lefebvre, when he spoke in the 1960s about a "right to the city," is now more widely shared; "the right to make the city" is no longer just a special case" (p. 4). Anjum and Saddam not only demand their "right to the city" but also concretize their right to create the city.

Roy explores Delhi as a proper city. This city attracts individuals who strive to excel economically and those who utilize urban media as a means to gain recognition. Organizations are carrying the flag of social work, continuing their illegal businesses, and people who are culturally and religiously motivated are trying to mark territory in this urban area. Saddam's account of his father's death reminds him that city life has nullified mercy. "Across the city, huge billboards jointly sponsored by an English newspaper and the newest brand of skin-whitening cream (selling by the ton) said: Our Time Is Now. Kmart was coming. Walmart and Starbucks were coming, and in the British Airways advertisement on TV, the People of the World (white, brown, black, yellow) all chanted the Gayatri Mantra" (Roy, 2017, p. 97). This shows that the city has commercial value with a touch of religion, culture, media, and fashion as backdrops.

In informal settlements like the "slums and squatter settlements, in resettlement colonies and 'unauthorized' colonies, people fought back. Thus, with a heterosocial character like Saddam, the novel showcases the essence of an open city. They often create their city at the margins without the necessary administrative procedures" (p. 5). Jantar Mantar becomes a political space where revolutionary agendas are presented on the streets, demanding change. Dr. Azad Bhartiya highlights the need for a revolution in the city through "an old cardboard sign covered with a dim, scratched, plastic sheet" (Roy, 2017, p.125) during the public protest at Jantar Mantar. He provides a detailed account of Delhi's administrative intentions and describes the challenges faced by ordinary people in India. As his name suggests, "Azad," meaning freedom, embodies the essence of revolution. People at Jantar Mantar engage with the media, challenge government policies and injustices, and demand their rights in their respective cities.

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Lefebvre (1992) notes that such revolutions are necessary in terms of politics, particularly in relation to the social and economic uplift of the masses. He writes that revolutionary activities are "not a political rebellion, a substitute for social revolution, nor is it a revolt of thought, a revolt of the individual, or a revolt for freedom" (Lefebvre, 1992, p. 201). He proposes that these acts of city people are "an elemental and worldwide revolt which does not seek a theoretical foundation but rather seeks by theoretical means to rediscover - and recognize - its foundations" (p. 201). Thus, the chapter The Nativity and Azad Bhartiya's cardboard becomes the epitome of social revolution, which is acted out to reiterate their foundations and agendas in the city.

In the chaos of Jantar Mantar, Anjum gets into a clash when she wants to adopt an abandoned baby. The need to find the baby, which vanishes in the crowd, leads her to Tilo, a South Indian, estranged woman. Tilo is the one who kidnaps the abandoned baby and names her Miss Jebbeen, the second. The second half of the story revolves around Tilo's life and the lives of three men who love her in their own way: Biplab Das Gupta, a Brahmin high-ranking bureaucrat in the Indian government, also known as The Landlord; Garson Hobart; Musa, a Kashmiri freedom fighter; and Naga, the journalist. Tilo's life gets entangled in Srinagar as she gets romantically involved with Musa. With Miss Jebeen, the first, Musa's daughter murder detail, the rape and struggle of Revathy, an Adhivasi Communist fighter who was the real mother of Miss Jebeen, the second provides a horrific picture of other various issues prevalent in contemporary India. The turning point in the novel occurs when Tilo's illegal adoption catches the police's attention as she seeks refuge in Jannat Guest House, which connects the lives of two unrelated individuals.

Bhartiya recommends that Tilo take solace in Anjum's graveyard. The chapter "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness" (Roy, 2017, p. 397) portrays the graveyard as a microcosm of society, where all its elements are present. Tilo's "successful tuition classes" (p. 398) provide an educated household member. The vegetable garden in the graveyard, "despite the smoke and fumes from the heavy traffic on the roads that abutted the graveyard, attracted several varieties of butterflies" (p. 399). Anjum's idea of making a swimming pool fascinates the dwellers, "so all in all, with a People's Pool, a People's Zoo, and a People's School, things were going well in the old graveyard" (p. 400). Musa, who was previously assumed dead, finds Tilo in the graveyard and spends a romantic night with her, still stagnant with the war for the freedom of Kashmir. Finding Tilo happy in the informal city space brings Musa relief. Miss Jebeen the Second, also known as Udaya Jebeen, becomes the most pampered child in Jannat Guest House, symbolizing hope and a future for this community. Thus, characters in the novel eventually find solace in the informal settlement of the graveyard, formalizing their existence in the urban space of Delhi.

Search for the Haven in the City

Roy's novel illustrates how marginalized individuals can reclaim and reinterpret metropolitan areas or urban city spaces to resist erasure and assert their identity. Anjum's initiative to turn the graveyard into Jannat Guest House embodies the essence of this defiance,

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where the underprivileged and unaccepted find solace, form a community, and challenge the heteronormative entities. The right to the city is not simply a reproduction or reinvention of spatial establishment, but rather, as per Henri Lefebvre's concept, it requires the construction of a substitute society that thrives with social life without being asphyxiated, silenced, or rendered unseen and unacceptable.

The novel displays the multidimensional experiences of marginalized citizens in urban India. Roy's characters, through their acts of boldness and compassion, construct places of well-being amid violence and discrimination, creating a city space in urban Delhi that becomes not only a concrete entity but also challenges the heterosocial power dynamics. Finally, this paper concludes that the novel confronts the idea of privileged urbanity and city spaces that undermine the marginalized and presents revolutionary characters like Anjum and Tilo, who are the role models of the misfits and weirdos, continuously demanding their right to the city, and creating a tangible as well as an abstract urban space for their survival, dignity, identity, and belonging.

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