

# 'Jannat Guest House': A challenge to the 'Stereotype' and celebration of 'Impurities': A Postmodern perspective to *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

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## Abstract

**Purpose of the study:** The purpose of the study is to deconstruct the essentialist hegemonic discourse of purity and present 'Jannat Guest House' as a challenge to the 'stereotype' and a celebration of 'impurities' in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* by Arundhati Roy.

**Methodology:** A postmodern perspective has been applied to this study. Postmodern theories of 'plurality', 'shifts' and 'inclusion' have been used for the meticulous study of the text. It uses the concept of 'deterritorialization' and the concept of 'rhizome' developed by Deleuze and Guattari.

**Main Findings:** Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* unpacks a narrative that, "by slowly becoming everything" resists the discourse of 'purity' as she has placed different voices irrespective of race, class, gender, or other binary specified terms, into one, Jannat Guest House. This study finds 'Jannat Guest House' as a Postmodern site of the dismantling of oppositional 'binaries' and a site of 'inclusion' which poses a threat to the 'stereotype' and a celebration of 'impurities'.

**Applications of the study:** The study is useful in the reading of the celebration of contaminated diversity. It will explore one of the mottos of the postmodern perspective and will be helpful to deconstruct the notions of purity.

**Novelty/Originality of the study:** It will help to make the reader reciprocate the notions of impurities. It will help to dismantle the gleaming, consistent and coherent notions of purity. It will bring a change in their thinking over the concept of home, and celebration of individuality.

## INTRODUCTION

With the emergence of Postmodern theory in the twentieth century, the 'discourse of purity has been challenged as 'modernity' presents itself, John Law et al. while reading Burno Latour, put it in "Modes of Syncretism: Notes on Noncoherence" as "gleaming, consistent and coherent-as something that is 'pure' rather than fuzzy" (Law et al. 2013, 172). Postmodernism is referred to as an 'intellectual movement', Terry Eagleton in *The Illusions of Postmodernism* defines it as a style of thought which is cynical of classical notions of truth, reason, identity and objectivity, expresses doubt of the idea of universal progress or emancipation, of single frameworks, grand narratives or ultimate ground of explanation (Eagleton, 1996). Steve Padley, in his *Key Concepts in Contemporary Literature*, discusses it as, "a critical apparatus through which contemporary society and culture could be examined, though not interpreted, or explained, along conventional theoretical, historical or philosophical lines" (Padley, 2006, 177-78). From the above-mentioned definitions of Postmodernism, it can be perceived that it preaches for flows, shifts, and multiplicities rather than order, organization and coherence. Therefore for the postmodernists, pluralities or fragmentation is something that they celebrated as it is an escape from the claustrophobic embrace of a 'fixed system of beliefs' rather than 'stereotype'. 'Stereotype' on the other hand, Andrew Edgar and Peter Sedgewick define in *Key Concepts in Cultural Theory* as, "an oversimplified and usually value-laden view of the attitudes, behaviour and expectations of a group or individual. Such views, which may be deeply embedded in sexist, racist or otherwise prejudiced cultures, are typically high restraint to change, and play a significant role in shaping the attitudes of members of the culture to others" (Edgar and Sedgewick, 2004, 380-381). The celebration of 'contaminated diversity' becomes one of the mottos of the postmodern perspective. Anna Tsing, in *The Mushroom at the End of the World: on the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, argues, "we are contaminated by our encounters [...] Everybody carries a history of contamination; purity is not an option" (Tsing, 2015, 27).

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The research intends to question the essentialist notions of purity. It focuses on dismantling the concept of hegemonic discourses to pose impurity as a threat to stereotypes. This research finds out how the celebration of inclusion irrespective of class, caste, and gender happens and finds out a narrative that challenges the authoritative mainstream.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* unpacks a narrative that, "by slowly becoming everything" resists that 'discourse of purity, as she has placed the different voices, irrespective of race, class, gender, or other binary specified terms, into one, Jannat Guest House. The Jannat Guest House, which is built in a 'graveyard' symbolically

related to death, where at the end all toasts to life, therefore become a postmodern site of the dismantling of oppositional 'binaries' and a site of 'inclusion' which poses a threat to the 'stereotype' and a celebration of 'impurities'. Therefore, this paper attempts to deconstruct the essentialist hegemonic discourse of purity and present Jannat Guest House as a challenge to the stereotype and a celebration of impurities by reading *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* from a postmodern perspective. Starting with the narrative pattern that she has used in her *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Somak Ghoshal says in his review of the book in HuffPost India that *The Ministry* is frustratingly rambling, and uneven in its register, using irony and poetry one moment, plunging into anodyne reportage the next, it appears to be composed by several minds and hands, and Its tone and texture cannot be decided, it is evident that when Roy is in form, the crystalline clarity of her prose sparkles off the page, the less she labours over a point, the more effectively it pricks our conscience (Ghosal, 2017). The language that she uses is not conventional English; she has somewhat created a polyglot verse. The incorporation of Urdu, Malayalam, Kashmiri, Hinglish (our exact cadences like, "Ai hai! Why so angry, jaan?"), Whatsapp-lingo, Indian bureaucratise, Shayari, Hindi film songs (Pyar Kiya to Darna Kya from Mughal-e-Azam), Shakespeare, the nonsense words of minds being lost, Bhojpuri folksongs, political propaganda, Sanskrit Shlokhas (Om bhur bhuvah svaha/Tat savitur varenyam/ Bhargo devasya dhimahi/Dhiyo yona prachodayat), the language of YouTube, Hindi's magnificent cornucopia of gaalis ("Haraamzadi") therefore subverts the homogenized form of writing a novel. So, the amalgamation of different registers or tools into one frame makes a 'collage' of narrative, which is in opposition to 'grand narrative', and it is an important feature of postmodernism. The conventional language or narrative that we find in conventional fiction, *Ministry* is an exception to that. Again the novel does not narrate the journey of a single character but rather a trajectory of multiple voices. Parallel narrative, whether it's a human being -Anjum, Saddam Hossain, Tillotamma, Revathy, Jakir Miyan, Nimmo Gorakhpuri, Musa or Naga and others or be it's the narrative of non-human beings, gets a similar platform to speak. Every geographical location of the narratives becomes a real projection, whether it's America, Iraq or Sahajanabad of Delhi with its ancient history or Gujrat with its political underpinnings or be its Kashmir with the ongoing political unrest. Each and everything gets textualized, therefore, it becomes a "salad bowl" of narrative where each fragmented story is accommodated.

## METHODOLOGY

A postmodern perspective has been applied to this study. Postmodern theories of 'plurality', 'shifts' and 'inclusion' have been used for the meticulous study of the text. It uses the concept of 'deterritorialization' and the concept of 'rhizome' developed by Deleuze and Guattari to show that shift and celebrate diversity.

## DISCUSSION

The Jannat Guest House, built in the graveyard, situated near a mortuary and a public hospital symbolically associated with the 'dead' becomes the residence or shelter house of all-human/non-human, male/female, living/dead, killable/unkillable, grieveable/ungriveable. Anjum declares it as 'the place of falling people, a place for doubly marginalized- 'a hub for Hijras who, for one reason or another, had fallen out of, or been expelled from, tightly administered grid of Hijra Gharanas' (Roy, 2017). It also starts the function of funeral services, which would bury 'those whom the graveyards and imam of Duniya had rejected' (Roy, 2017). It not only shelters human beings, living or dead but also animals, 'a Noah's-arch of injured animals' (Roy, 2017). Jannat Guest House becomes a postmodern zone where life and death, animate and inanimate, human and inhuman, cannot be differentiated. It becomes the abode of all coming from different cultures, different castes, and gender. The 'impure' nature of the Jannat Guest House situated in between life and death comes from its intersections of characters coming from different cultures, castes, and gender, which dismantle the hegemonic notion of 'purity'. The 'hybrid' nature of Jannat Guest House, "the battered angels in the graveyard that keep watch over their battered charges h[old] open the doors between worlds [...] so that the souls of the present and departed could mingle, like guests at the same party" (Roy, 2017) challenges the stereotype by incorporating the gendered, racial, and class impurities represented by different characters.

*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* firstly presents gendered impurity. Rather the impurity of 'body' through Anjum, a transgender, commonly known as Hijra in India as Indian society is highly patriarchal and provides the gendered manual of hetero-normativity therefore, does not fit into the category of 'masculine' or 'feminine', and labelled as "queer" (LGBTQ). Anjum, named Aftab at birth, living in Sahajanabad, old Delhi, is mistaken as a boy by everyone apart from her mother. But the discovery of her identity as a hermaphrodite does not make her fit into the gender norms of her society. Her mother believes, that all things, not just living things but all things- carpets, clothes, books, pens, musical instruments- had a gender. Everything is categorized as either masculine or feminine, man or woman, except her baby. She also knows that two words for those like her child are called - 'Hijra' or 'kinnar'. But she is well known for the fact that two words do not make a language (Roy, 2017). Anjum is considered a curse for family and society. She is considered by society a bad omen, and her family disowns her identity. Her father, Mulaqat Ali khan, who once embarks "on the cultural project of inculcating manliness in Aftab" (Roy, 2017), rejects her and never greets her in life. When Aftab is sent to Ustaad Hameed Khan to learn Hindustani Classical music to groups of children, they begin to tease her. The humiliation she faces becomes unbearable for her at every step of growing, leaving her shattered. At a young age, Aftab is enchanted by a hijra called 'Bombay silk', and his desire to "become" like 'her' makes him follow her till he reaches the gate of Khwabgah. Khwabgah, the house of dreams, is a shelter for the Hijras who are ostracized by society. Aftab could not tolerate the biological changes that were taking place in his body, "his body had suddenly begun to wage war on him" (Roy, 2017). He is welcomed by Kulsoom Bi, who believes that "Ordinary people in the Duniya- What did they know about what it takes to live the life of a hijra? What did they know about the rules, the discipline the sacrifices?"

[...] That they built themselves up, bit by bit, humiliation by humiliation..." (Roy, 2017). She was the head of the Khwabgah and had a great affection for Aftab/Anjum. Anjum undergoes the sex reassignment surgery following the suggestion of Kulsoom Bi. Anjum's embarking on the profession of Hijra makes her the representative of that community. Her appearance in interviews, TV shows, newspapers and magazines turns her into "hyper (in)visible", therefore, she is using her "body" to become "visible". Soon, she becomes the "object" of consumer culture, which uses her body, as a site of curiosity, to make their benefit. The pain and humiliation of patched together body and partially realized a dream they feel can be decoded through the words of Nimmo, "for us the price rise and school admissions and beating husbands and cheating wives are all inside us. The riot is inside us. The war is inside us. Indo-Pak is inside us. It will never settle down. It can't" (Roy, 2017). The novel is following Edward Said's relevant idea of 'the self and 'the other' in "Orientalism", us and them, binary opposition versus stereotypes. Colonialism, Patriarchy, Capitalism and political atrocities make the condition of transgender people marginalized. Still, the addition of their "patched together body" makes them "doubly marginalized". Kim Q, Hall argues that, "there are no pure bodies, no bodies with impermeable borders [and] reality is not composed of fixed, mutually exclusive or pure bodies" (Hall, 2014). It showcases her struggle for survival in a culture that has been authorised by the mainstream hegemonic society. Her resistance to that stereotypical society is set by her decision to start her livelihood in a graveyard. 'Graveyard' is associated with dead people and is believed to be unsuitable for living there, but for Anjum, the graveyard is the beginning of her spiritual inspiration. Her resistance is apparent in her breaking the barriers of society and choosing the anti-normative life that fits hers. It provides an alternative to mainstream society. Anjum retreats into a graveyard and starts the business of Jannat Guest House for her livelihood. At this juncture, Anjum begins to connect with the world. Her Duniya and the outside world begin to intersect. The discarded, abandoned and lonely people from any community and caste, along with the animal, always receive a warm welcome with the same amount of safety and affection.

The appearance of the character of Saddam Hussain represents racial impurities. He confesses to Anjum that his real name is Dayachand, "he was born into a family of chamars-skinners- in a village called Badsahpur in the state of Haryana" (Roy, 2017). In Modern India's system of positive caste discrimination, Chamar is classified as schedule caste or Dalit caste. Historically, they are outside the Hindu ritual ranking system of castes known as Varna. The most traumatic experience he witnesses is, "A few men went into the police station and brought my father and his three friends out. They began to beat them, at first just with their fists, and with shoes. But then someone brought a crowbar, someone else a carjacks. I couldn't see much, but when the first blows fell, I heard their cries [...] it was a strange, high sound, it wasn't human ..." (Roy, 2017). His father is brutally killed by a frenzied mob of "cow vigilantes" everybody watched, but nobody stopped them" (Roy, 2017). The murder is instigated by the fraud police officer Sherawat of Dulina police Station for not bribing him. The police exercise their power over the lower class to perpetuate dominant authority against the subalterns. This nerve-chilling horror of the murder of his father alters Saddam Hussain's religious inclination and his change of identity. He denounces his faith of untouchability, accepts Islam as Saddam Hossain and works in a hospital as shit cleaners, the task only assigned to the Dalits by the dominant castes. Later he quits his job and comes to reside at the Anjum's guest house, the place for the fallen ones. The politics of exclusion is exposed by Roy in her novel. This Saddam Hussain takes shelter in Jannat Guesthouse and launched Jannat Funeral Services. The inhuman behaviour against the Dalits, their lack of racial identity, and historical exclusion make them the victim of the dominant upper caste. The hegemonic hierarchical tendency to keep purity is exposed by Roy in her novel as the Hindu doctors, mostly Brahmins, do not touch the sweepers for fear of being polluted, "the doctors, like most Hindus, looked down on them and considered them to be untouchables. The doctors would stand at a distance with handkerchiefs making their noses and shouting instructions to the stuff..." (Roy, 2017). Untouchability is so deeply rooted in India that the upper caste Hindu people can touch dogs and cats but does not touch human beings, the otherwise untouchables. This graveyard represents racial impurity by incorporating Saddam Hossain. A place where there is no binarisation. Their existence in the graveyard among the dead makes the life-in-death situation easier for them, for Anjum philosophizes with Saddam Hussain "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 are not real. We don't really exist" (Roy, 2017). Therefore Saddam Hussain challenges the discourse of ethnic purity of race at a time when there was a call for 'purity' and 'cleanliness' by political propagandists.

The character of Tillottama, though an inhabitant of this Duniya, is introduced to the readers by Biplab Dasgupta, revealing that her father is an untouchable pariah, whereas her mother, a Syrian Christian. Tilo is adopted by her mother, who initially abandons her because she is born out of wedlock. Her mother remains unmarried for the rest of her life and opens a school. Tilo is forced to retire to the periphery of the society in the Graveyard with the other outcasts on because of her courage to map the forbidden territory and her capacity to empathize with people. She does not embrace the mainstream stereotypical notions of marriage, relationships and motherhood. She is presented as an unconventional woman from the beginning. She breaks the stereotypical notion of Womanhood through her relationship with Naga, Musa and Garson Hobart. In telling the individual and collective experiences, Roy unmask the fault lines of hegemonic power. She re-examines the damaged nerve to get the whole picture through the interrelated stories of Tilo, Musa, and Naga.

## CONCLUSION

The graveyard, which they build as Jannat Guest House, serves as an alternative to mainstream society. It deconstructs the notion of home, to a larger extent a society or, a state as they make it a subversion of the so-called 'home' as provided by the authoritative normative manual. It gives shelter irrespective of caste, class, and gender. It becomes the

survival space for the marginalized people, “fallen peoples”. Miss Jebeen the second, the abandoned daughter of female guerilla fighter, Tilo, Dr Azad Bhartiya, joins this by discarding the mainstream society. It is a place of “hope” or “of becoming”, which the heteronormative society never includes. The construction of this guest house signifies the challenge to the stereotypical notions, the desire of its residents to get liberation from the power-structured society, a substitute of mainstream community. The gathering for the people, irrespective of everything, provides them equality, and freedom. Miss Jebeen the second also takes shelter in the Jannat Guest house as the letter reveals that she is the daughter of Maoist comrade Miss Revathy. She abandons her daughter to protect her from the brutal reality. Almost all loose ends are tied into an impure unified whole in the place called Jannat Guest House, and all the margins intersect here. The Jannat Guest House is free from all dictatorial laws and oppressive rules for ordinary people and embracing to both humans and non-humans with the same intensity and affection. Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “rhizome” can be applied as they move from the hierarchical society through “deterritorialization” or a “lines of flight”. As Deleuze and Guattari define rhizomes as, “principles of connection and heterogeneity: any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be... collective assemblages of enunciation... multiplicity... has neither subject nor object, only determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions that cannot increase in number without the multiplicity changing in nature... A rhizome may be broken or shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines... there is a rupture in the rhizome whenever segmentary lines explode into a line of flight, but the line of flight is part of the rhizome” (Nayar 2010). Therefore to the outcasts like Tilo who starts her teaching in the graveyard, “parents in the neighbourhood flocked to enrol their children in the classes Tilo held at Jannat Guest House. Her pupils call her Tilo Madam and sometimes Ustanji (Teacher in Urdu)” (Roy, 2017), Ustad Hameed begins to give music lessons to the students he considers promising, and all others reject the domain of “Duniya” and take a flight to tread beyond territory where the fragmented section gets mingled and have their own identity. As Tilo’s poem says,

“How to tell a shattered story?

By slowly becoming everybody.

No

By slowly becoming everything.” (Roy, 2017)

By incorporating the fragmented “everything” into that constructed “Jannat Guest House”, which is secular and democratic in absolute terms and a shelter for the fallen ones, Roy has challenged the paradigm of mainstream society and provides an alternative to it. In the conclusion, it can be justified to say that Jannat Guest House is a postmodern site where the impurities get celebrated and pose a challenge to the stereotype

## LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

From the above discussions, it is evident that the novel celebrates the impurities and toasts to the fragmentation. But here also occurs some problem as the Jannat Guest House poses as a version of utopia. The mingling of reality and fantasy worlds creates a barrier to experiencing the day to day life. As the postmodern theory is suspicious of classical notions of truth, the reality or the existence of Jannat Guest House gets blurred. The notion of the celebration of the individual has been hampered by the mainstream hierarchy. While posing a threat to stereotype it also creates a stereotype of impurity. Researchers need to approach the text from post-human and other perspectives also.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST AND ETHICAL STANDARDS

There exists no conflict of interest with the current organization and no unethical practices were followed during the research.

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