

## **Heterotopic Space and Marginalized Identities in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*.**

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### **Abstract**

Heterotopia' as envisaged by Foucault, refers to a spatial peculiarity where a single place may represent various spaces. Michel Foucault presents this concept in his works, *The Order of Things*, *Of Other Spaces* as well as in his elaborations on Bentham's 'Panopticon' in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. This concept unravels the multiple possibilities in spatial studies where space can be more than what meet the eyes. Foucault presents six principles of heterotopias like heterotopia of crisis or deviation, its universal and embedded nature, as a space of otherness and illusion and so on. Places like cemetery, ships, prisons, menstrual huts, library, motels and museum are a few that Foucault refers to as heterotopic in nature. Arundhati Roy, in her latest novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) lines up a number of characters who represent the marginalized groups with respect to their caste, race, gender or religion in the present Indian political scenario. The fictional space of the novel gives them the narrative agency contrary to their realistic counterparts, who with vulnerable identities remain invisible and voiceless in the margins. The novel presents a desolate place like the graveyard which Anjum, the central character, transforms into 'The Jannat Guest house' which acts as a counter space where these individuals of vulnerable identities find voice of resistance to the dominant discourse and an abode to exist with dignity. Roy instead of presenting a fictional utopia which is non-existent presents a heterotopic world of counter narratives where all the prominent characters represent the marginalized sections of the contemporary Indian society thereby unraveling the marginal space occupied by such under privileged groups of the society as potential spots of resistance to dominant narratives of power and oppression.

### **Key words:**

Heterotopia, Foucault, The Ministry of Utmost Happiness, Arundhati Roy, Identity, Counter narratives.

Michel Foucault, the French philosopher, who shook the world with his iconoclastic ideas tampering with the age-old convictions and systems of thoughts, with his writings and lectures turned the world habitable enough for those who could not conform to the standards set by the hetero-normative society. His writings directly addressed the issues encountered by those vulnerable lot who were labeled as perverted and abnormal because they were different from the 'so called' normal people in terms of their sexuality, race, language, ethnicity, gender and so on. The very state apparatus operates for the 'normal' and the 'able' where laws are made and executed monitored by the judiciary to suite the 'normal' thereby turning a group of people as 'the other'. This injustice meted out to a number of people which made them unprivileged in terms of rights and values relegated them to the margins of the society. The irony lies in the fact that such gross injustice was taken for granted and the public in general seem to be silent to such atrocities done to the people who were unable to follow the standards set by the main stream society in terms of sanity, ethnicity, sexuality, gender and so on. It is in this context that Foucault's contributions to the human civilization stand out as unique.

Arundhati Roy, the Indian writer of international acclaim, in her latest novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, presents a number of characters who represent the under privileged group of people in the contemporary Indian Society. In fact Roy is known for her incessant struggle against oppressive power even if the oppressor is the state. Her non fictional writings which filled the long gap of twenty years between her two novels themselves are the testimonies to reveal her stance in life and her affinity towards the powerless. While her first novel is confined to a small village in Kerala, the second novel published in 2017 exactly twenty years after the publication of *The God of Small Things* presents the other side of India or the 'othered' India. Perhaps the twenty years of activism and struggle against the oppressors like the corporate forces, fanatics or politicians might have culminated into her second novel. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is in fact dedicated to the 'Unconsoled' whose voices are forcibly muted or unattended to by those who are in power. If Foucault in the twentieth century went at odds with the homogenizing tendencies of the state and the power yielding apparatus of the civil society by attacking the very notion of power and the hypocrisy behind the system that favors a few through his iconoclastic notions on power, discipline, madness, sexuality and so on, in the twenty first century Roy presents a counter world in the fictional narrative where through alternate perspectives margins may be redrawn and in turn marginalized identities find new ways of expression and representation. Hence to reveal this counter world operative within the world presented in the novel, Foucault's concept of 'heterotopia' seems to be a handy tool.

It is in a radio lecture delivered for the radio conference on French culture in December 1966 that Foucault expressed his notion of heterotopia for the first time. At a meeting of the Circle of Architectural Studies he presented a reworked version of this lecture under the title "Des Escapes Centres". It got published in 1984 just before his death and its translation appeared in English in 1986 as "Of Other Spaces" in *Diacritics* (Canter & Dehane 13). In the preface to *The Order of Things* too he remarks on the concept of heterotopia As Foucault explains, heterotopias are counter spaces which unlike utopias are real places where other places may be represented. Foucault uses the analogy of mirror to explain the concept of heterotopias. When one sees oneself in the mirror, the mirror is real but the image is not. Heterotopias, hence, are spaces of otherness that one encounters in real places through illusory images. In the concept of heterotopia both the real and the unreal come together blurring the boundaries between them.

There also exist, and this is probably true of all cultures and all civilizations, real and effective space which are outlined in the very institution of society, but which constitute a sort of counter arrangement, of effectively realized utopia, in which all the real arrangements, all the other real arrangements that can be found within society, are at once and the same time represented, challenged and overturned, a sort of place that lies outside all places and yet is actually localizable.

(Foucault 332)

Foucault identifies six principles by which heterotopias may be categorized. The heterotopias of universal significance like cemetery are present in all cultures. The second principle explains heterotopias of 'crisis' or 'deviation'. Places like menstrual huts are cited as examples for heterotopias of crisis while mental asylums and old age homes are examples for heterotopias of deviation. Another principle deals with the heterotopias of embedded space where different spaces may be represented in a single space. Theatres and gardens are examples. Other examples of heterotopic spaces mentioned by Foucault include motels, places of restricted entry like saunas, place where time and space get new significance like libraries and museums and so on. Hence these remarks on space reveal the spatial bend that Foucault gave to human experience and how space plays a pivotal role in determining the varied identities in life. While the second principle namely the heterotopias of crisis or deviation reveals how

ethnic, sexual or mental peculiarities of certain individuals become the criteria for them to be categorized and segregated to occupy the margins of the society and to live in isolation, the other principles like the notion of embedded space and illusory space present the possibilities of space to represent the identities of those who are denied the same in the world of privilege where only certain people who are considered as normal and able may live with dignity and self esteem. Thus the concept of heterotopia relegates space from its conventional role of being the passive stage or setting where the drama of life gets enacted; rather attributes it with agency that determines the roles played. Identity thus determines the space that an individual occupies in life. Both private and public spaces are demarcated according to the identity the individual is attributed by the society. The concept of heterotopia presents the fluidity of space where the mainstream houses the marginal space and the principles like its embedded and illusory nature provide the scope for the fluidity of identities contrary to the fixed way identities are perceived in the society in general.

Arundhati Roy in her latest novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, presents a set of characters who occupy the major part of the narrative space who in fact represent the downtrodden and oppressed group of individuals in the contemporary Indian society and who find least representation in the society. They are pushed into the margins of the society because of their identities. The present paper is an attempt to study with reference to Roy's novel, how identities determine the space that individuals occupy in life and how the space they occupy turn heterotopic to represent various spaces in single space where the real and the illusory can coexist turning the lives of those otherwise vulnerable individuals, meaningful. In the novel heterotopic space may be identified as physical as well as mental spaces which the characters occupy at various stages in their lives.

The novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, begins in a graveyard where Anjum, a hijra, takes refuge when she finds her identity of being a hermaphrodite leaves with her fewer options. When born she was assumed to be a boy but her mother discovered a girl part hiding along with the boy part. This was a great shock for the mother, Jahanara, who with her mother tongue Urdu never encountered a thing that didn't belong to either of the two genders. She took the child to Hazrat Sarmad Shaheed's dargah and prayed. The saint has got a past that was peculiar and one has to go beyond the accepted notions of logic to accept how he got accepted and turned a saint for even the conservative believers. Hazrat Sarmad was a Jew, came to India to be with his love of life; a Hindu boy whom he met in Sindh. Later he embraced Islam but renounced it at a later stage. He was executed at Red Fort during Aurangzeb's regime when he refused to recite the religious prayer, Kalima, completely. He is a martyr of love and faith whose refusal to be categorized into a particular religious identity brought him his death. The situation turns heterotopic when after his death he is worshipped as a saint and adored by religious believers.

Because inside the dargah, Sarmad's insubordinate spirit, intense, palpable and truer than any accumulation of historical facts could be, appeared to those who sought his blessings. It celebrated (but never preached) the virtue of spirituality over sacrament, simplicity over opulence and stubborn, ecstatic love even faced with the prospect of annihilation.

(*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* 10)

Both Anjum (named Aftab as a child) and Hazrat Sarmad fail to get categorized into conventional identities for which they have to pay a big price; the former displaced first from her family then from the haveli of hijras and the latter got executed. But Hazrat Sarmad culminated into being in a heterotopic space where death and life came together to make his presence more prominent. In the case of Anjum, she left her family to live with other hijras in a haveli called 'Khwabgah' which meant 'the

house of dreams' from which she later moved out when she found she could not continue after her bitter experience at a riot, and decided to live in the graveyard. Both the Khwabgah and the graveyard form heterotopic spaces the former housing a world of illusions and the latter the cemetery which Foucault identified as the heterotopic space of universal nature.

At the graveyard Anjum, initially, found herself vulnerable like a tree when she was attacked by urchins but slowly she turned it her abode. First it was Ziauddin, the blind iman who befriended her and started to visit her at the grave yard. Later people with their identities at stake started to move in. She managed to make a dwelling in the grave yard with the graves as the base. She turned her dwelling at the graveyard into a guest house and gave it a name, 'The Jannat Guest House'. As the name suggests, Jannat guest house was a heaven for desolates like her. Others who frequented or stayed in the guest house include, Saddam Hussein whose original name was Dayachand, S. Tilottamma who was called Tilo, Zainab whom Anjum brought up as a daughter, Nimmo, the hijra from Khwabgah are a few to mention. All these characters represent marginalized identities in the current Indian political and social scenario.

The sense that many of the most important wars and riots are inside, not outside, the characters, is vital to the impact of this novel. Nobody is at peace, everyone is restless with unsaid memories and unattained dreams. But some characters are much less realised than Anjum; they brush past us and hardly draw us into their world. This decision to bring in so many varied voices feels political, as if it is Roy's statement about the need to give attention to those who are so often overlooked by narrators of modern India. We know from her passionate polemics how she feels about the inequalities and injustices of her country, and several of the subjects she has written about in non-fiction appear here, lightly transmuted into fiction.

(Walter 1)

S. Tilottama who is called Tilo is another character of marginalized identity as she represents women with lesser backup in the form of family tradition or even a family. The character, Tilo, enters into the narrative space when the abandoned child of Revathy, a Maoist raped by police men during police custody, appears in the street near Jantar Mantar, a place where all protests for justice and struggles against injustice are unfurled. Tilo brings up the child and names it Miss Jebeen the second, named after Musa's deceased daughter. At this juncture the novelistic space is squandered with many of the complex issues that Indian political and social realms are tangled in. Through the characters of Tilo, Musa, Miss Jebeen, Miss Udaya Jebeen, and Revathy Roy could bring in the issues like women's rights and predicament, the Kashmir issue in which the innocent people including children getting murdered by the army in fake encounters and during peaceful rallies, the issues related to Maoists in central part of India where the tribal people especially women are brutally exploited even by law enforcing agents like the police, the predicament of women who are black and how they are discriminated on the basis of skin color, abandoned infant girls and so on.

The character, Anjum, is doubly marginalized; not only by her sexual orientation but her religious origin too leads to her being exploited and tortured. The first taste of discrimination she experiences is from her own family. "While his sisters and brother went to school, Aftab spent hours on the tiny balcony of his home" (TMUH 17) The house which is the space that the family shares becomes uncomfortable for her which culminates in her shifting to a haveli of hijras living in her neighborhood which was called 'Khwabag' – the House of Dreams. It is here for the first time Anjum finds the space as the one where she belongs to. "It was the only place in his world where he felt the air made way for him. When he arrived, it seemed to slide over, like a school friend making room for him on a classroom bench." (TMUH 19). The incident that made a havoc in her life which transformed her view of herself

and the world was the pilgrimage she undertook to Ajmir and to the shrine of Wali Dakhani, the seventeenth century Urdu poet, at Ahmedabad. She went with Zakir Mian, the owner of a flower shop in the space rented by her father. Anjum finds the world so hostile towards her because she is different from others and never wanted to travel alone so that the company of Zakir Mian was a welcome option for her. But the travel never ended as they planned. The day they reached Ahmedabad was the one when the Gujarat riot followed by the Godhra incident occurred. Zakir Mian got killed in the riot and Anjum was found in a refugee camp in the outskirts of Ahmedabad. Anjum returned was never the same as she used to be. She turned cold and indifferent. Soon she found the Khwahbag too suffocating for her and ended up in the graveyard. “ONLY A TENMINUTE TEMPO RIDE from the Khwabgah, once again Anjum entered another world.” (TMUH 57)

Marginalization on the basis of gender is presented in the novel not only through the character of Anjum/Aftab but other characters like Tilottama and Revathy too are brought in to present the predicament of women. Tilottama who is referred as Tilo whose birth outside the wedlock of her parents turned her an orphan in life though her mother adopted her and provided for her living. She is almost alone in life but struggles defiantly against her loneliness by pursuing education and living by herself in a flat. Three men fall in love with her, she but marries one and leaves him later and find her emotional solace in Musa, a Kashmiri who was her classmate at the college of Architecture. She brings up the child abandoned by Revathy the Maoist at the Jantar Mantar where the unfortunate people who haven't lost faith in justice even after being exploited and suffering injustice are involved in eternal strike against the authorities for the delayed justice. In a society like Indian society where the beauty standards still prioritize white skinned women, the projection of dark complexioned women characters like Tilottama, Revathy and Revathy's infant child, later named as Miss Udaya Jabeen make the narrative space heterotopic where marginalization based on race gets a different dimension by giving agencies to these characters to articulate their identities.

Revathy details about her life in a letter she later sends to Dr. Azad Bharatiya whom she thought has rescued her child at Jantar Mantar. She explains how her mother had been discriminated and tortured by her father solely for the reason that she was black in color. Revathy lived with her grandparents and her marginalized position never deterred from actively struggling against injustice. She joined in a militant group who were fighting against the corporate companies in Jharkhand and central part of India who loot the natural resources there. Through the character of Revathy the tribal issue too is brought in revealing the exploitation that is meted out on them by multinational companies who loot the natural resources at the mines there. Revathy as a tribal woman was doubly marginalized who got gang raped by the policemen when she was arrested as a Maoist and kept in police custody. She had to abandon the child born out of the gang rape. Later she got killed in a police encounter. She too forms a part of the heterotopic world of the Jannat guest house as she is honored posthumously by a symbolic funeral service under the supervision of Anjum.

Dayachand alias Saddam Hussain presents the predicament of the dalits in India. He changed his name from Dyachand to Saddam Hussein when he happened to watch a video showing the execution of the Iraq leader, Saddam Hussein. He was impressed by Saddam Hussein's disdain for his executioners just before he was hanged to death, He belongs to a particular caste who live by skinning the dead cows to turn the skin into hides and then to leather. The caste Hindus will not touch the dead cows as they believed the carcass may pollute them. Once cows are dead they call dalits like Dyachand to take away the stinking carcass. It was on one such occasion that Daychand's father got killed by the mob accusing him as cow killer. This incident happened when he was a small child and he had to remain a witness to his father getting killed by the frenzied mob. He decided to take revenge against the police



officer, Sehrawat, whom he believed is responsible for gathering people in front of the police station when his father failed to give the police officer with the demanded amount of money as bribe. . He happens to meet Anjum and later falls in love with Zainab and becomes part of the Jannat Guest house. The corrupt and exploitative situation in which the dalits live in the contemporary times are revealed here where the police who are supposed to maintain law and order themselves turn out to join hands with the culprits.

Dalits even when they got placed in government service too they are not able to escape from the stigma of their caste identity. It is evident in the case of S. Murugesan a sepoy in Indian army who got killed while in service. The army contributed to build a cement statue to honor his valour but the caste Hindu could not tolerate the statue of an Untouchable in their village. Hence it was attacked and the statue turned headless and without a rifle. The statue may be regarded as an heterotopic space where the dead soldier became more prominent with the headless statue representing the caste discrimination in its vehemence.” The headless statue remained at the entrance of the village. Though it no longer bore any likeness to the man it was supposed to commemorate, it turned out to be a more truthful emblem of the times than it would otherwise have been”. (TMOUH 119)

Through the character of Musa, Roy uncovers a saga of betrayal, cruelty, injustice and untold exploitation and torture meted out against the people of Kashmir. Musa and Tilo were in love while they were at School of Architecture, Delhi. After graduation they rifted. He returned to Kashmir and got married later. The death of his wife Arifa and his three year old daughter Miss Jabeen is just one instance of the innumerable incidents in which innocent people get killed even during such peaceful gatherings like funeral rallies. This incident has turned Musa into a militant fighting for the freedom of Kashmir and to avenge the death of his wife and daughter. The people of Kashmir are leading a life in death and death in life. “What I know for sure is only this: in our Kashmir the dead will live forever; and the living are only dead people, pretending.”(TMOUH 143)

Among the minor characters it is Dr.Azad Bharatiya who is prominent with his peculiar identity. His original name as given to him by his parents was Inder Y. Kumar. He lives on the streets of Jantar Mantar in an unending strike against the government. He represents all those unfortunate people who undergo exploitation and injustice in their lives. His identity is inclusive of all those people who face unjust treatment in their lives. “But I stay here on those people’s behalf. I fast for their progress, for the acceptance of all their demands, for the realization of their dreams and for the hope that someday they will have their own government.” (TMOUH 129) Hence at Jantar Mantar by representing all those who seek justice he occupies the heterotopic space of embedded spaces where different identities are represented.

It is evident that identity of these characters turn decisive in the space that they occupy in their lives and they are marginalized and discriminated because of their identities with respect to their religion, caste, gender, ethnicity, race and region. Revathy gets killed in an encounter in Jharkhand and Musa too in an encounter at Kashmir as he wished after he achieved his revenge against Amrik Singh , the army Officer who was responsible for the murder of many innocent people in Kashmir through fake encounters..Under the leadership of Anjum and the assistance of Saddam Hussein, they are given funeral rites at the Jannat Guest House. The violent lives are given a peaceful ending with the funeral services, thereby adding them too as part of the graveyard family of vulnerable identities. The space turns heterotopic as the living and the dead come together in one place. The presence of the dead in the grave yard and people like Anjum with marginalized identities living among the graves present a peculiar condition of heterotopias. “The Ministry of Utmost Happiness is an outspoken sketch for lost

identities. Anjum as mentioned above is a broken identity looking for a place to survive in the chaotic society. Many of Anjum's community lived in Khawbgah. They were looking for satisfaction and a survival place not equality" (Ishtiaq, Hassan & et.al 4). The Guest house was not only an abode for destitute humans but for animals too. Not only are human beings discriminated but animals too. Animals which are old and sickly which no longer can serve their masters are abandoned. Such animals are found and brought to the guest house by Zainab and Saddam. The world which privileges people on the basis of class, caste, gender and other criteria could not register anywhere in their books of records the infinite humaneness shown by those who are denigrated as barbaric and less than human. They live in a world of in-between nature of reality and illusion and doing what they think just and right without waiting for the state to reckon their acts measured in a scale that suits only the privileged class in the society.

Between Zainab and Saddam, they had turned the graveyard into a zoo- a Noah's Ark of injured animals. There was a young peacock who could not fly, and a peahen, perhaps his mother, who would not leave him. There were three old cows that slept all day....Several cats came and went. As did the human guests in Janat Guest House.

(TMOUH 199)

While the graveyard, Khwabgah, Kashmir, the dargah of Hazrat Samrad Shaheen and the Jannat guest house are the physical spots of heterotopic space in the novel, all those characters with marginalized identities find themselves at war within their identities incongruent to the world outside which in turn represent the heterotopic space of non physical or mental in nature. In *History of Madness* Foucault describes a movement across Europe in the seventeenth century which saw the establishment of institutions which locked up people who were deemed to be 'unreasonable'. This included not only mad people, but the unemployed, single mothers, defrocked priests, failed suicides, heretics, prostitutes, debauchees in short anyone who was deemed to be socially unproductive or disruptive. He labels this movement the 'Great Confinement'(38). He continues his study of confinement in his history of the birth of the prison *Discipline and Punish*. The inmates of the Jannat guest house seem to form such a group of 'socially unproductive or disruptive people'. But the tendencies to confine them or shut them out of the main stream society perhaps fail when they construct a space for themselves which is real at the same time illusory; a heterotopic space where they could attain happiness of utmost kind by coming into terms with the utmost reality of death.

The body of the hijra is in fact in itself heterotopic in nature as the two genders are in an incessant war. Anjum experiences such a war inside her body which is described as the woman's self entrapped in a male body. Nimmo, one of the hijras at Khwabgah calls this inner struggle as 'Indo- Pak war' (TMOUH 23). The war and riots that the so called normal people encounter in the outside world are experienced inside the body by a hijra where conflicting desires of divergent sexes compete to get the better hand. Self and the other confront each other in a single body leaving the hijra in incessant torment.

The Jannat Guest House at the graveyard is the heterotopic space that stands in stark contrast to the world outside which Anjum calls it as 'Duniya'. Anjum and other characters of marginalized identities who form the inmates of the guest house manage to create a world of their own; a make belief world modeled on the world outside where they were able to enjoy the luxuries of the 'duniya'. But at the same time when they happened to move into duniya they feel distort and found themselves ill fit. "As they moved into South Delhi, the mismatch between the passengers and the vehicle they were drew plenty of curious and sometimes angry looks. A little intimidated, they rolled the window-glasses up." (TMOUH 408). But while the guest house flourished in its comforts and services including Tilo's

classes for children in the neighborhood and Ustad Hameed's music lessons, the vegetable garden, zoo and swimming pool, the 'duniya' was moving to a horrible period. "Hell was closing in on the home front too. Gujarat ka Lalla had swept the polls and was the new Prime Minister. ...The saffron parakeets that had been biding their time were set loose. They swooped into university campuses and courtrooms, disrupted concerts, vandalized cinema halls and burned books." (TMOUH 400-401)

When 'duniya' was wallowing in the catastrophe, the Jannat guest and its inmates seem to be unaffected by such developments. Each one staying there had ended up there after a life full of agony. Anjum came to the graveyard to die but she found life there; a life that flourished among the dead. It is the place where people with broken lives flocked together and developed new wings of hope instead of despair. They joined hands, helped each other and turned a chain of broken lives holding to each other from falling. In to their fold they include not only everyone who were needy but everything which needs to be tended to; consoled. Each of these characters carried within them a saga of discrimination and injustice meted out against them by the main stream society. The experience have left an indelible mark upon their psyche that none of them feels at home in the society outside. They found their happiness in the graveyard, a place shunned by the privileged class. In the newly found world they attained the utmost happiness from which even death cannot deter them. When Tilo came to know about Musa's death, her grief didn't shatter her as the heterotopic space of the graveyard had provisions to deal with death too. 'Tilo would grieve deeply at Musa's passing, but would not be undone by her grief because she was able to write to him regularly and visit him often enough through the crack in the door that the battered angels in the graveyard held open (illegally) for her'. (TMOUH 437)

Roy presents the graveyard as the 'Jannat' or heaven for these characters who remained 'unconsoled' by the authorities for their grievances. Instead of presenting an idealized utopian place like arcadia or edan where none faces any discrimination, Roy places these characters in the stark reality of their existence where the real and the illusory come hand in hand to form the heterotopic space of happiness which is of the utmost kind ministered at the graveyard, a least sought after place treaded only in nightmares. When the world failed them of their expectations of justice and humanity their despair led them to the graveyard which opened up new vistas of existence with dignity and self esteem.

The novel invokes in the readers new hope by throw opening spaces within the real world where the 'Unconsoled' may find their utmost happiness even in the wake of dismal circumstances of fanatics and parochial forces getting the lead. The possibilities of space that Foucault had left open in the last century find new expressions with changing times and of unprecedented challenges.





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