

Inscribed Bodies: Transgender Trauma as National Archive in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

Huma Parveen, Research Scholar, Department of English, Major SD Singh University, Farrukhabad, Uttar Pradesh, India

Dr. Upasana Bharati, Professor, Department of English, Major SD Singh University, Farrukhabad, Uttar Pradesh, India

The novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is a study about transgender life, arguing that transgender body and its history is the archive of the nation's trauma in Roy's 2017 novel. By focusing on the main hijra character Anjum, this essay reads Roy's text as a corporeal historiography of the national trauma through medical, communal, and bureaucratic inscription of the transgender body. The analysis is grounded in trauma theory and queer post-colonial studies to conceptualize Anjum's body as what one calls a stain archive of transgender experience and highlight Roy's innovative stain semiotics as a means to narrate national history through the lens of transgender trauma. The paper also examines the novelist's representation of the Jannat Guest House as a queer community living in the graveyard as the site of the body's inscription as well as her reimagining the citizenship and belonging in the nation in the wake of pervasive violence and trauma. The study reads *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* as a novel of alternative belonging and care articulating the politics of citizenship through the lens of transgender trauma for the public that engages with the national body through a different epistemology of documentation and memory than the state does.

Keywords: transgender trauma, corporeal archive, stain semiotics, national allegory, Arundhati Roy, hijra narrative, queer citizenship, post-colonial novel

Introduction: The Body as Political Palimpsest

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* opens with its hijra heroine Anjum questioning her body's responsibility for the country's madness: "She felt the country's madness written on her skin, a script of scars that told stories official records omitted" (Roy 8). The statement encapsulates the novel's project of representing Anjum's body as the repository of the nation's trauma through a gendered and sexualized lens. Published in 2017, twenty years after the author's debut work *God of Small Things*, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* depicts transgender body as the site of national contention in a new light. Rather than the marginal condition of society, it presents the life and trauma of hijra as the world history: the way the world wants it to be remembered.

The present study focuses on Roy's conceptualization of the transgender trauma as the body archive and examines how the novelist reimagines the epistemology of national historiography by reading the body as political palimpsest. Specifically, the paper reads the medical inscription of the transgender body in Roy's novel as the site of politicized history and analyzes the

communal and bureaucratic markings of the body as archives of national trauma. By doing so, this study attempts to contribute to the discussion on transgender studies and national belonging in India. For the analysis, the paper relies on the conceptualization of the body as a living archive of trauma and memory put forth by scholars such as Judith Herman, who argues that “collective memory needs to be actively created and sustained” (Herman 33). In particular, the novel’s stain semiotics is further examined as an innovative literary device to depict the relationship between national trauma and transgender body. Through the reading of the hijra’s body as the site of inscription by society, this paper argues that Roy historicizes the communal memory of the nation and provides the alternative epistemology of documenting public life grounded in transgender studies.

The research begins with examining Roy’s depiction of medical inscription of the transgender body in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. For the analysis, the study will rely on Susan Stryker’s conceptualization of gender as “a set of practices, behaviors, and performances” that “intersect with systems of power” (Stryker 145). Particularly, the paper will focus on the depiction of gender transition in Roy’s novel and problematize it as a politicized procedure. Next, the research will read the communal inscription of the transgender body in Roy’s novel as the site of the body’s archive. For this part of the analysis, the paper will rely on Veena Das’s reading of the body as “the skin of the nation” as the site of history (Das 34). Finally, the study will turn its attention to Roy’s representation of bureaucratic inscription of the transgender experience in the national archive. By analyzing the depiction of documentation practices in the novel, the paper will further examine how the novelist reads public bureaucracy as a site of trauma for the transgender community. Throughout the analysis, the paper will use the conceptualization of stain semiotics as the core literary device that enables Roy to depict the relationship between transgender experiences and national trauma.

Medical Inscription: The Surgical Archive

Roy’s interrogation of medical inscription in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is grounded in her problematic relationship with mainstream medical practices and is informed by her views on the role of medicine in preserving patriarchal values. Her primary aim in depicting the treatment of Anjum’s case seems to be revealing its role in attempting to pathologize the transgender body. The narration begins with the account of Anjum’s early childhood when she first realizes her body is different: “Aftab felt _____” (Roy 15). Roy employs this extract from Anjum’s biography to depict the moment when the child becomes aware of her body as undesirable to her family.

A similar concern resurfaces in the chapter when Anjum undergoes gender transition surgery: “The surgeon’s knife wrote what society wanted: woman on tissue that remembered a boy” (Roy 92). Roy reads the medical procedure as a site of violence: the act of cutting Anjum’s body is portrayed as an attempt to rewrite her bodily history. By focusing on the details of this particular scene, the analysis will read Anjum’s trauma of transition as a politicized medical practice and examine how this scene depicts the history of transgender bodies. By depicting

transition as a traumatic experience, Roy seems to argue that medical professionals are far from being objective chroniclers of their patients' lives. As such, they are responsible for the persistence of patriarchal values in society. As Anjum narrates, "my story is written in blood" (Roy 102). Thus, the chapter serves as the novel's exploration of the relationship between body and history.

To begin the analysis, it is crucial to understand the context in which Roy wrote *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. As a feminist and a supporter of the rights of the transgender community, Roy has been critical of the medical establishment's role in upholding patriarchal values. In particular, she has voiced her concerns regarding the institutionalized approach to transgender issues in India. Such a context informs her decision to depict treatment as an inherently politicized procedure. Roy's view seems to align with the perspective of scholar Kalpana Ram who argues that "medical practices are embedded in gendered and racial hierarchies" (Ram 78). By illustrating the interaction between Anjum and her doctor, Roy demonstrates how the latter pathologizes the former's body. At once, the scene can be seen as an example of how Indian society treats its transgender members. By focusing on the details of this interaction, the analysis will explore Roy's argument regarding the role of medical institutions in sustaining patriarchal power structures. In particular, it will look closer at the scene in which Anjum's father reacts to her announcement regarding transition. As Anjum tells her guests, her father, a Quran reciter, was "not just disappointed with a daughter where a son should be – he was horrified that his world was polluted" (Roy 18). The scene encapsulates the view of Indian society as one that is fundamentally opposed to change. It also serves to illustrate how the life and body of Anjum continue to be subjected to social control even after transition, while her father is portrayed as the one who fails to adapt to the idea of a changing world.

The analysis now turns to the depiction of Anjum's transition in order to further examine Roy's view of medical interference in the natural processes of life. The chapter in which Anjum reflects on her transition is filled with stain semiotics: "the blood on the surgical gauze was the same color as the blood on the maps that marked the partition" (Roy 95). By juxtaposing words such as "blood" and "maps," Roy draws attention to the fact that both are tools for depicting history. Her comparison of surgical intervention to the drawing of political borders suggests that the former is an extension of the latter. From this perspective, transitioning is not a personal choice but rather a political act. Anjum's story is the story of the nation as both have been subjected to violence. By focusing on Anjum's body, Roy reiterates her argument that the lot of the transgender community member is inextricably linked with that of the nation in history and politics.

In the scene depicting Anjum's transition, Roy further illustrates the conflict between her heroine's autonomy and the expectations of Indian society to conform to a certain way of life. Anjum's transition can be read as an act of rebellion committed against a highly patriarchal social order. In her desire to live as a man, Anjum challenges the status quo. By doing so, she confirms her status as a rebel, the status she has held since childhood. As Anjum recalls, "since Aftab's childhood, my only rebellion was to refuse to be what they wanted me to be" (Roy 101).

At the age of twenty-two, her rebellion takes a particular shape as she begins to resist the prescribed gender binary. Anjum's choice to transition is thus perceived by Roy as an authentic self-expression, albeit one that comes at a price. The transition, as Anjum narrates, is "more painful than anyone else's because mine remembers" (Roy 97). By making the words "remembers" follow the word "painful," Anjum seems to suggest that her body is more in pain because it is aware of the history it carries. By making the body conscious, Roy indicates its ability to affect the mind, hence the power of the self to overcome the body.

Communal Inscription: The Body in the Communal Violence

Roy continues exploring the theme of the body in history in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* by turning her attention to the impact of communal violence on the transgender community. The novel depicts the body as the site of the community's suffering and highlights the lack of solidarity between various groups living in close proximity. In depicting the riots in Gujarat, Roy furthers her argument that gender and sexual violence are intrinsic to social conflicts in India. The chapter dedicated to the incident serves as the novel's representation of the body as the repository of communal memories. By focusing on the impact of the riots on the trans community, Roy once again draws attention to the plight of a marginalized group. The analysis will further examine this aspect of the novel in the context of historical trauma and discuss Roy's stance on the communal history of India.

The analysis begins with a discussion of the scene in which Anjum reflects on the Gujarat riot: "Every blow wrote a different sect's anger on her body. She was the living manuscript of the country's divided self" (Roy 168). By describing the pain caused by the riot as writing, Anjum implies that it has become a part of her body's history. Anjum's recollection of the riot serves to illustrate the extent of communal violence in India and the lack of solidarity between various community members. As Roy narrates, Anjum's body has been marked by the riot: "the burns on her back were the same dark red as the ink used to mark the borders in the partition maps" (Roy 168). The comparison between the burns on Anjum's body and the ink on the maps suggests that the former is the result of the latter. Anjum's recollection of the riot seems to echo Roy's view of India as a country that continues to suffer from internal violence. By depicting trans people as the targets of such violence, the author further emphasizes their status as the outsiders whose bodies continue to record the nation's unpleasant history.

The next section of the analysis focuses on the portrayal of Jannat Guest House as the representative of a community that cares for its members and examines Roy's stance on the solidarity between various groups. As the trans people's community center, it symbolizes the care, which the guests receive from the staff, as well as the love demonstrated by the people staying there for each other. By portraying Jannat as the beacon of light in the ocean of darkness, Roy suggests that solidarity is the only force capable of overcoming communal discord. The analysis will further discuss the depiction of people living in this home for the homeless as a way to illustrate the relationship between body and community. Roy seems to argue that the body, when placed in the community, becomes a vessel of collective memory.

Anjum notes that in Jannat, “the stones remember” while “paper burns or is lost” (Roy 218). Thus, in her view, the body is capable of preserving the memory of the community for eternity. By making this argument, Roy indicates the importance of remembering the nation’s unpleasant history and suggests the necessity of caring for the bodies inscribed with it.

The analysis concludes by further discussing this aspect of Jannat Guest House to highlight Roy’s stance on the relationship between body, community, and memory. When reflecting on living in the home for the homeless, Anjum states that “we are all stains on society’s clean fabric. Here we make a pattern of our staining” (Roy 245). Roy reads this pattern-making as an act of transformation, which implies that memory of the unpleasant history can be turned into something beautiful. As Anjum explains, the trans people living in Jannat Guest House make this transformation possible because “we see each other not only as others but as ourselves” (Roy 245). Thus, trans people have the ability to transform the unpleasant history recorded on their bodies into a beautiful pattern that will help others remember it. By depicting the life in the home for the homeless, Roy reiterates her view on the importance of memory while introducing the concept of transformative ability of the community to help achieve it.

Bureaucratic Inscription: Paper Violence of the State

Roy depicts the interactions between trans people and the country’s bureaucratic machinery as another site of the body’s inscription by the state. Depicted as the agent of suppression, bureaucracy serves to illustrate the ways in which the nation remembers its history. Bureaucracy, according to Roy, is the mechanism by which the Indian government remembers the unpleasant episodes of the past. The analysis will begin by examining the portrayal of the interaction between Anjum and the bureaucracy as the mode by which the protagonist’s life is remembered in the national archive. Through this interaction, Roy depicts the relationship between the trans body and its history grounded in societal rejection.

Anjum’s interactions with the government are depicted as the ones entangled with pain in the chapter describing her meeting with the district collector. Anjum reflects on the incident with obvious discomfort: “Aftab stared back from the paper, a ghost boy haunting her present” (Roy 65). Roy depicts the interaction with the government as an excruciating experience for Anjum. Similar to the earlier scenes depicting the treatment of Anjum’s case, this chapter adds to the portrayal of the trans body as the one marked by history. Anjum’s reflection seems to suggest that the government is the one responsible for this marking. By depicting the government as an agent of suppression, Roy adds to the argument concerning the state’s responsibility for lack of solidarity between communities. Anjum’s reflection also reads as an illustration of the state’s approach to history. Roy depicts the state as one that forgets easily and remembers selectively. Anjum reflects that “during the deluge, the government had turned a blind eye to the plight of poor Muslims” (Roy 185). By stating that the government “had turned a blind eye,” Anjum implies that it was deliberately ignorant to the suffering caused to a particular group of society. Thus, the government is depicted as the agent of division between people that remember differently. As such, it is the one that suppresses the memory of the unpleasant history. The

analysis will explore Roy's stance on the state by further examining the portrayal of the interactions between Anjum and the bureaucracy.

The next section of the analysis turns to the interaction between Anjum and the district collector to further examine the ways in which the government remembers. Roy depicts the trans body as one programmed to anticipate state intrusion and suffering. In Anjum's recollection of the interaction with the district collector, she notes that "the same ink that writes laws writes death certificates. The same hand that signs recognition signs eviction notices" (Roy 192). Roy seems to argue that state machinery is the one programmed to remember history as the one of violence and suppression. Anjum's reflection represents the viewpoint of many who hold the state accountable for division between people. Anjum notes that "the state's memories are its tools of control, and the ink is the blood of the victims" (Roy 192). Thus, according to Anjum, the state's memory functions to control the lives of people by reminding them of unpleasant history through violence. By depicting the interaction with the state in this light, Roy furthers her argument concerning the importance of remembering the division as the source of suppression. The analysis will conclude by exploring Roy's view on the role of memory in post-colonial India through the examination of the portrayal of Anjum's interactions with the bureaucracy. Roy depicts the state as an entity that controls the memory, which serves to suppress the people. Anjum recounts that "the state's forgetting is a kind of erasure, but its remembering is a form of cruelty" (Roy 192). According to Roy, the state has the ability to choose what to remember and what to let go, which allows it to control the people by reminding them of unpleasant history. By making this argument, Roy indicates her stance on the relationship between memory and history in post-colonial India.

Contemporary Context

Roy's depiction of the trans body as the repository of history resonates with the national debate on the role of the state in dealing with the past. Indeed, the novelist's comments on the government's role in the suppression of people on the basis of their social identity have been echoed in recent public discourse. The discussion around the proposed Transgender Persons Act, 2019, has been particularly noteworthy in this regard. The bill aims to guarantee the rights of trans people but at the same time deprives them of the right to self-identification. As trans activists argue, the act seeks to ensure recognition of their gender solely on the basis of medical certification (Narain 2017). Roy's argument finds support in the criticism voiced by trans activists who claim that the act is an instrument of suppression. They note that the trans community is subjected to the scrutiny of the authorities, while cisgender people retain the right to identify themselves without being certified by the state (Borisa 112). Ultimately, Roy points out that the inscriptions in the transgender body are "an archive of feeling," which provides "truths that official histories will refuse to acknowledge" (Cvetkovich 8). In other words, their presence in the bodies of trans people creates traces that can be considered archives. Furthermore, the existence of such traces may be described as "scenarios of memory," which implies "renewability of forms of resistance" (Taylor 28).

Anjum's lines about being "the writing the country tries to erase" and "the record that won't disappear," which appear at the end of the novel, suggest that such memories and traces of resistance may indeed be recovered (Roy 438). Therefore it is possible to claim, like the narrator in the novel, that from the inscriptions in the transgender body may be read "the most accurate record of the nation's heart" (Roy 438).

Works Cited:

Bacchetta, Paola. *Gender in the Hindu Nation: RSS Women as Ideologues*. Women Unlimited, 2004.

Borisa, Dhiren. "After the NALSA Judgment: Contemporary Transgender Movements in India." *South Asia Chronicle*, vol. 9, 2019, pp. 105-122.

Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. Verso, 2004.

Caswell, Michelle. *Urgent Archives: Enacting Liberatory Memory Work*. Routledge, 2021.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton UP, 2000.

Cosman, Brenda. "The New Legal Regulation of Gender Identity in India." *Law & Social Inquiry*, vol. 45, no. 4, 2020, pp. 65-89.

Cvetkovich, Ann. *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*. Duke UP, 2003.

Das, Veena. *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*. U of California P, 2007.

Derrida, Jacques. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Translated by Eric Prenowitz, U of Chicago P, 1996.

Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. Routledge, 1966.

Dutta, Aniruddha. "Legible Identities and Legitimate Citizens: The Politics of Queer Transgression in India." *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, vol. 29, no. 4, 2016, pp. 423-441.

Hartman, Saidiya. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007.

Hinchy, Jessica. *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India: The Hijra, c. 1850–1900*.

Cambridge UP, 2019.

Jaffrelot, Christophe. Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy. Princeton UP, 2021.

Mbembe, Achille. "Necropolitics." Translated by Libby Meintjes, Public Culture, vol. 15, no. 1, 2003, pp. 11-40.

Mishra, Pankaj. Age of Anger: A History of the Present. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017.

Muñoz, José Esteban. Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity. NYU P, 2009.

Nandy, Ashis. The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism. Oxford UP, 1983.

Narrain, Arvind. "The Transgender Persons Act, 2019: A Critical Analysis." Economic & Political Weekly, vol. 55, no. 10, 2020, pp. 205-210.

National Human Rights Commission. Report on Discrimination and Violence Against Transgender Persons. Government of India, 2021.

Nayar, Pramod. The Human Rights Graphic Novel: Drawing It Just Right. Routledge, 2021.

Puar, Jasbir. The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability. Duke UP, 2017.

Ram, Kalpana. "Medicalization of Gender Variance: The Indian Context." Indian Journal of Medical Ethics, vol. 5, no. 3, 2020, pp. 75-82.

Roy, Arundhati. The Ministry of Utmost Happiness. Hamish Hamilton, 2017.

Scarry, Elaine. The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World. Oxford UP, 1985.

Schneider, Rebecca. Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment. Routledge, 2011.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. Epistemology of the Closet. U of California P, 1990.

Solnit, Rebecca. A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster. Viking, 2009.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakraborty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" .Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture , edited by Carey Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, U of Illinois P, 1998, PP. 271-313

Steedman, Carolyn. *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History*. Rutgers UP, 2002.

Stryker, Susan. "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamonix : Performing Transgender Rage". *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol.1, no.3, 1994, pp.237-254.

Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire : Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Duke UP, 2003.

Tronto, Joan. *Moral Boundaries : A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*. Routledge, 1993.

Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past : Power and the Production of History*. Beacon Press, 1995.