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**A Critical Exegesis of Sociopolitical Constructs in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness***

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**Abstract:**

Arundhati Roy's second novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* brings together many different characters and events. It not only talks about incidents from modern Indian history but also looks back to the medieval period, even mentioning the time of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. The novel touches on several important issues such as the painful life of transgender people in society, the rise of terrorism, and the suppression of Dalits. All these issues can be understood under one broad idea, the sociopolitical aspect of life. This research paper studies these sociopolitical perspectives by examining the experiences of various characters and the situations they face.

**Keywords:** Sociopolitical constructs, terrorism, transgender identity

**Introduction:**

Arundhati Roy's second novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* was published in 2017. It did not gain as much popularity as her first novel *The God of Small Things*, yet it was well received by critics. The novel was shortlisted for *The Hindu Literary Prize 2017*, long listed for the *Man Booker Prize 2017*, and also became a finalist for the *National Book Critics Circle Award 2018*. These recognitions show that the book, though complex, had an important place in contemporary literature. The novel weaves together different stories from various parts of India, and at the center of these stories is the character Anjum, a transgender woman. Anjum was born as the fourth child of Mulakat Ali and Jahanara Begum. The couple already had three daughters, and their fifth child later was a son. Before Anjum's birth, her parents had planned that if the baby was a boy, they would name him Aftab. However, when Jahanara Begum gave birth, she was shocked to see that the child was transgender. At first, she could not believe it, but after checking several times, she realized it was true.

Aftab was a gifted child. He had the ability to recite a large part of the Quran in Arabic, even though he could not fully understand its meaning. His parents noticed

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his sweet and melodious voice, so they sent him to learn music under Ustad Hameed Khan. At first, this seemed like a good step because his talent was being shaped in the right direction. However, as Aftab grew older, his gender identity began to show more clearly. His voice sounded more feminine, and his movements and behavior also appeared similar to that of girls. This difference did not go unnoticed by the people around him. Slowly, the children in the neighborhood started teasing and mocking him, making his life difficult. This situation reflects how society reacts to anyone who does not fit into its strict ideas of gender. Instead of encouraging his talent and individuality, Aftab had to face ridicule and exclusion. Through this, Arundhati Roy highlights the painful struggles of transgender children, who are often rejected not because of their lack of ability, but because of the rigid and insensitive attitudes of society.

At first people were amused and even encouraging, but soon the snickering and teasing from other children began: He is a she. He is a He or a she. He is a He and a she. She-He, He-she Hee! Hee! Hee! When teasing became unbearable Aftab stopped going to his music classes. (12)

The problems faced by transgender people in India often begin inside their own homes and neighborhoods. Society is so narrow-minded that it struggles to accept the third gender, even though a transgender child is also a gift of nature, just like boys and girls. This lack of acceptance makes life very painful for them.

Aftab's story in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* shows this reality clearly. Even though he was talented, he could not continue his education. He was not allowed to go to school because children and neighbors constantly teased him. The same reason forced him to leave his music lessons, which he loved very much. His skills and interests were suppressed, not because of his lack of ability, but because of the prejudices of society. This raises an important question: why can't people accept transgender children as normal children? The answer lies in deep-rooted social attitudes shaped by patriarchy, religion, and ignorance. Instead of treating all children with equal love and respect, society creates barriers that deny transgender children their basic rights to education, dignity, and growth. Arundhati Roy uses Aftab's experience to make us think critically about these unjust social practices and the urgent need for acceptance and equality.

The story shows that gender identity becomes a serious problem for transgender children, as it often leads them to feel cut off and isolated from society. At the very stage in life when they need the strongest support and love from their parents, they are usually left alone to face the cruelty of the outside world. This painful reality is seen in the life of Anjum. From childhood, she suffered many insults and humiliations simply because she was transgender. Feeling unwanted and alienated, Anjum finally chose to leave her family home and move permanently to Khwabgah, a place where other transgender people lived together. Her mother

requested her to return, but Anjum refused. She did not want to once again face the demons of a society that mocked and rejected her. Instead, she decided to accept her true identity. She changed her name from Aftab to Anjum, began wearing women's clothes, and embraced life as a woman. This was not just a personal decision, but also an act of courage against a world that denied her dignity.

Anjum made Khwabgah her permanent home and lived there with full rights. However, the pain of rejection never fully left her. Even when she sometimes met her father on the street, he ignored her, refusing to recognize his own child. This deepened her sorrow, as the rejection came not from strangers, but from her own family. Roy uses this to show that for most transgender people, alienation begins at home. Families often distance themselves, hoping to erase the "shame" they wrongly associate with a transgender child. Through Anjum's story, Arundhati Roy highlights the larger issue: society pushes transgender people into the margins, forcing them to live in separate spaces instead of being accepted as part of the community. This not only shows the personal pain of Anjum but also reflects the collective struggle of many transgender people in India.

Mulakat Ali for his part was less able to accept the situation. His heart never mended. He chose to sever all ties with his son. He never met Anjum or spoke to her again. Occasionally they would pass each other on the street and would exchange glances, but never greetings. (25)

Another serious problem faced by transgender people is the question of permanent residence or home. For most of them, having a safe and secure home is almost impossible. This is clearly seen in the case of Anjum. She was forced to leave her well-established family home and shift to *Khwabgah*, where she had to live with strangers who, like her, belonged to the transgender community. Sadly, this experience is not unique to Anjum. Many transgender youth are pushed out of their own homes by their parents and family members. Instead of receiving love and protection, they are abandoned and left to survive in unknown places with unfamiliar people. In this way, their own families, who should have been their first support, become the first to reject them.

Anjum's situation was still better than that of many others. At *Khwabgah*, she found an organized home and the guidance of elders like Ustad Kulsoom Bi, who looked after her. But most transgender people are not so fortunate. Many of them end up living on the roadside, forced to beg for survival, or live among criminals who exploit and humiliate them. Their lives become marked by violence, danger, and insecurity. Reports by organizations like NCBI have recorded many incidents of abuse and violence against transgender people.

One of the major problems faced by transgender people is the difficulty of finding proper employment to earn their livelihood. In most cases, they are forced to

depend on only a few traditional ways of earning, such as begging, singing, dancing, or performing at marriage ceremonies. Because of social prejudice, they are rarely included in formal jobs or professional workplaces. As a result, their participation in social, economic, cultural, and political life is very limited. This exclusion keeps them on the margins of society.

Roy shows this struggle through Anjum's life. While living at Khwabgah, Anjum and her fellow transgender companions earned their living by performing music and dance. However, when Anjum left Khwabgah and began living in the graveyard, survival became much more difficult. She had no secure income and had to face many hardships. Despite the rejection, poverty, and danger around her, Anjum showed determination and strong willpower. Her desire to live with dignity and her dream of building a better life pushed her forward. This reflects a larger truth about transgender communities: even when society denies them opportunities, many of them struggle with courage to rise above adversity.

Arundhati Roy highlights this not only to show individual resilience but also to point out society's failure. If people like Anjum are given equal opportunities in education and employment, their talents and strengths could contribute meaningfully to the progress of society. By showing Anjum's hardships and determination, Roy urges us to rethink the unfair barriers placed before transgender people. Another painful issue faced by transgender people is the violence and humiliation they suffer at the hands of society. They are often not treated as equal human beings, but as outcasts. The main reason behind this is the social dogma that views transgender people as "sinners" who are punished by God. Because they cannot become mothers or fathers, society wrongly sees them as incomplete and unworthy. What makes the situation even more tragic is that many transgender people themselves begin to believe in these misconceptions. They blame themselves for their suffering and accept society's false judgment, which destroys their self-confidence and self-respect. Instead of being valued, they are insulted, mocked, and abused both physically and mentally.

Arundhati Roy shows how transgender people are often forced into dangerous and degrading situations. Many are exploited as homosexual slaves, while others are pushed into becoming drug carriers or dealers, simply because society does not give them any respectable opportunities. Even the police, who are supposed to protect citizens, treat them with cruelty. Since the police also come from the same dogmatic society, they too believe transgender people are "sinners." As a result, transgender people often face harassment in police custody and are sometimes locked up with hardened criminals, where they suffer sexual abuse and further violence. This reveals a deep failure of the system: instead of protecting a vulnerable community, social and legal institutions increase their suffering. Roy uses these examples to make us question how justice can exist in a society where an entire group of people is denied

dignity, equality, and safety. Her novel urges us to see transgender lives not as objects of pity or shame, but as a call for urgent social reform and human rights protection.

Arundhati Roy beautifully presents the painful emotions of her characters, such as social rejection and mental suffering. In her novels, especially in this one, many characters experience deep emotional pain because they are socially isolated. Their loneliness comes from the way society treats them as outsiders or different. By studying these characters closely, we can clearly see how their social loneliness shapes their thoughts, feelings, and actions. Roy's writing also helps readers understand how emotional wounds are often connected to social problems, making her work both realistic and deeply human.

Mulakat Ali and Jahanara Begum had five children and Aftab was fourth among them. His mother concealed the secret of his being transgender from the society for a long time to save him from the mental suffering that the society could give him. But the secret was automatically revealed as his voice and way of walking changed and children started teasing him, Ms Roy had depicted this incident beautifully. "He is she. He is not a He and a She. She-He, He-She Hee! Hee! Hee! (12)

Transgender people often suffer more from mental trauma because society isolates them and makes them feel uncertain about who they are. Even a small doubt can deeply hurt their confidence. In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Aftab, who later becomes Anjum, changes completely and starts living in the Khwabgah with other transgender people. However, even there she cannot find peace. Her confidence is repeatedly broken by painful experiences. The most tragic moment comes during the Gujarat riots, where her caretaker Zakir Miyan is killed. The rioters spare her only because she is a transgender person, which makes her feel both helpless and guilty. Even after escaping that horrible event, the memories continue to haunt her. Unable to find comfort in Khwabgah, she finally leaves and starts living in an old graveyard under the open sky. This shows how her life has been marked by deep loneliness and rejection from society. Anjum's story becomes a powerful reflection of how social exclusion can destroy a person's spirit, yet she still struggles to find meaning and dignity in a world that denies her both.

Another character who experiences a similar kind of loneliness in the novel is Tilottama. Like Anjum, she also suffers emotional pain and social rejection from the very beginning of her life. She was born as the illegitimate child of her mother and a man from an untouchable caste. Because of this, her mother left her in an orphanage soon after birth. Later, when her mother adopted her again, people began to suspect that Tilottama was her biological but illegitimate child. This made her mother feel ashamed, so she always kept a distance from her.

When Tilo grew up, she went to Delhi for higher studies, where she lived alone and did not form close relationships. During a play rehearsal, she met three men, Naga, Biplab, and Musa who became important figures in her life. She loved Musa deeply but they never married. Her love for him led her to travel to Kashmir, where she was arrested and tortured by the police. After returning, she married Naga, but their relationship was short-lived because she kept an emotional distance from him. Naga could never truly understand her inner world. Biplab too admired her silently but could not express his love because of her quiet and withdrawn nature. Throughout her life, Tilo remains a symbol of loneliness and emotional detachment. She avoids deep connections, perhaps because of her early experiences of rejection and pain. However, by the end of the novel, there is a small change in her character, she begins to open her heart a little. She starts teaching poor local children for a very small fee and adopts a baby girl, Miss Jebeen the Second. This shows that, despite her loneliness, Tilo finally finds a sense of love and purpose in caring for others, hinting at her quiet inner healing.

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is not just a story of individuals but a strong reflection of India's social and political realities. Through characters like Anjum, Tilottama, Musa, and Dr. Azad Bhartiya, Roy exposes the pain of people who live on the margins of society. She connects their personal struggles with larger issues such as caste, gender, religion, and politics. The novel becomes a voice for the unheard, showing how political systems often fail to protect humanity and justice. Roy's writing blends fiction with truth, emotion with resistance, and personal suffering with social protest. Her narrative shows that real happiness and peace are possible only when society learns to accept differences and value compassion over power. Thus, the novel stands as a powerful critique of inequality and a call for a more humane and inclusive world.

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