

Gendered Marginalization in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*: Insights from Judith Butler and Michel Foucault

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Abstract

This paper explores the theme of gendered marginalization in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* using the ideas of Judith Butler and Michel Foucault. Butler's concept of gender as performance and Foucault's idea of biopolitics help examine how power, cultural norms, and societal expectations shape and marginalize gender identities. The novel challenges the social and political systems that uphold inequality, offering a strong critique of the connections between gender, and class. This study shows how the characters' struggles against cultural and institutional oppression reveal the complex relationship between personal identity and societal control.

Keyword: Gender Performativity, Biopolitics, Power and Identity, Cultural Norms, Societal Control, Arundhati Roy

Introduction

Brief Overview of the Novels: Plot, Themes, and Focus on Marginalized Identities

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness (2017) encompasses a panoramic portrayal of contemporary India, traversing multiple decades and geographies to engage with the nation's socio-political unrest. Central to the narrative is Anjum, a hijra (transgender woman), whose life embodies resilience in the face of systemic exclusion and stigmatization. Anjum's path

intersects with those of other marginalized individuals—including Dalits, Muslims, women, and displaced communities—collectively weaving a polyphonic narrative of resistance and survival. Roy critiques the institutionalized violence and structural disproportions that pervade Indian society, offering a touching reflection on themes of identity, belonging, displacement, and dissent. Set against the backdrop of contemporary India with its intersecting fault lines of caste, religion, gender identity, state violence and spatial dispossession, Roy's novel invites a reading through the lens of critical theory. In particular, the insights of Judith Butler on gender performativity and subject formation, and Michel Foucault on power, knowledge, discipline and subjectivation, provide rich theoretical frameworks for probing how gendered marginalization functions in the novel- and how literary agency might serve as a tool for social critique.

Review of Previous Literature

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) has attracted a wide range of critical responses that address its political urgency, narrative form, and ethical vision. Scholars have recognized the novel as an ambitious exploration of India's marginalized communities—Dalits, Muslims, women, and hijras—whose lives intersect within a fragmented socio-political landscape. However, despite the growing body of scholarship, few studies have systematically examined gendered marginalization through the combined theoretical insights of Judith Butler's performativity and Michel Foucault's biopolitics. Existing research tends to approach either gender and sexuality or state power and discipline in isolation, leaving the relationship between these forces underexplored.

Early critical engagement with Roy's novel has often emphasized its political scope and social realism. Binod Aryal, in his essay "Reading Polity from the Margin," interprets Roy's narrative as a critique of governance and state violence, noting how her fiction exposes the "hidden mechanisms of control" that shape the lives of those on the peripheries of power (Aryal

79). Similarly, Danish Suleman and Rehman draw on Foucault's concept of biopolitics to argue that Roy's India is a disciplinary state where bodies are categorized, put under surveillance, and normalized according to hierarchies of religion, caste, and gender (Suleman and Rehman 4). Javeed Ahmad Raina's article "Biopolitical Cartographies in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*" extends this argument, identifying the graveyard and the Khwabgah as Foucauldian heterotopias—counter-spaces that resist dominant systems of visibility and control (Raina 7). While these studies productively engage with Foucauldian theory, they often subordinate the gendered dimension of Roy's critique to her broader political agenda.

Conversely, other critics foreground gender identity and performativity through a Butlerian lens. Avdhesh Kumar Suman interprets Anjum's transformation from Aftab into a hijra as an act of embodied resistance against patriarchal and caste-based systems, suggesting that Roy "reclaims the abject body as a site of agency" (Suman 3). Brinda Noel likewise examines how Roy subverts heteronormative binaries, asserting that Anjum's life story reveals the "social construction of intelligible gender" (Noel 221). These interpretations underscore Roy's compassionate representation of the hijra community and her challenge to gender essentialism. However, such readings often treat performativity separately from the wider biopolitical systems that shape and control bodies, thus overlooking the structural aspect of Roy's critique.

Another strand of scholarship focuses on form, empathy, and resistance in Roy's fiction. Meenakshi Bharat argues that Roy's fragmented narrative and shifting perspectives embody the "dispersed consciousness of the oppressed" (Bharat 52), while P. K. Jha emphasizes her use of narrative empathy as a means to humanize the marginalized and expose systemic violence (Jha 16). Although these scholars link form to ethics, they stop short of examining how narrative form itself enacts performative resistance within biopolitical constraints.

The connection between Butler's and Foucault's theories remains a relatively underexplored area in Roy studies. Butler's concept of performativity emphasizes how identities are repeatedly enacted through social norms, while Foucault's biopolitics reveals how these norms are maintained and controlled through institutional power and surveillance. Combining these perspectives offers a deeper understanding of Roy's portrayal of gendered marginalization, where identity, agency, and subjection are intertwined yet in tension. Although there are scattered mentions of both thinkers in recent critiques, few have integrated their ideas to examine how Roy depicts agency within social regulation—specifically, how her marginalized characters act, resist, and redefine meaning in oppressive social contexts systems.

Therefore, the present research seeks to bridge this gap by reading *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* through a combined Butlerian–Foucauldian lens. This integrated approach highlights how Roy's narrative transforms the politics of gender and caste into a meditation on biopower, performativity, and resistance. By analyzing how characters such as Anjum and Tilo inhabit heterotopic spaces and enact performative subversions, this study aims to demonstrate how Roy's fiction redefines literary agency as a tool of social critique, challenging the very structures of intelligibility and governance that marginalize her protagonists.

Theoretical framework: Butler's performativity and Foucault's biopolitics

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* redefines gender as a performative construct, created through repeated social acts that mimic coherence. Butler challenges essentialist readings of gender identity, describing it as “a stylized repetition of acts” (Butler 191). Gender, therefore, is not innate but continuously enacted within restrictive cultural norms. These regulatory norms, which impose heteronormativity and patriarchy, marginalize those whose performances fall outside the binary. In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, the performative nature of gender becomes a central lens for interpreting Anjum's identity as both a site of subjection and subversion.

Michel Foucault's conception of biopolitics, articulated in *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*, examines how modern institutions regulate life by managing bodies and populations. Power is dispersed and productive, operating through normalization rather than overt coercion. Foucault's framework illuminates how Roy's novel represents the Indian state's surveillance, policing, and categorization of bodies—particularly marginalized ones such as hijras, Dalits, and religious minorities. The cemetery, for instance, becomes a Foucauldian heterotopia—a space outside societal norms where life and death coexist, challenging disciplinary boundaries.

Gender performativity and Anjum's marginalization

Anjum's life reflects Butler's idea that gender is a performance shaped by social norms that determine what is considered understandable or acceptable. Born Aftab, she performs masculinity until her identification with femininity renders her unintelligible within patriarchal society. Butler notes that "those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished" (Butler 522), and Anjum's ostracization from her family and society exemplifies this. Yet, Roy also presents her as a site of resistance: by establishing the Jannat Guest House in a graveyard, Anjum reclaims a marginal space as a sanctuary for other outcasts. This performative reshaping of belonging challenges existing hierarchies of both gender and society.

Critics such as Avdhesh Kumar Suman and Brinda Noel emphasize that Roy's portrayal of the hijra community dismantles heteronormative binaries and exposes systemic exclusions (Suman 3; Noel 221). Anjum's transformation becomes an act of personal and political resistance, showing how performativity can create agency. Through her empathetic storytelling, Roy urges readers to see that gender is socially constructed and maintained through systems of control and violence.

Gender Fluidity and Resistance in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Arundhati Roy employs gender fluidity not merely as a thematic concern but as a central narrative strategy to critique binary constructions of gender and to illuminate the workings of marginalization and resistance. The protagonist, Anjum, serves as a powerful lens through which the novel explores the intersections of gender identity, social exclusion, and political defiance. By applying Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity alongside Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics, one can discern how the novel both exposes and subverts the regulatory mechanisms that govern gendered identities.

Anjum's life story exemplifies a direct challenge to essentialist notions of gender, which conflate identity with biology. Born Aftab and assigned male at birth, Anjum's transition into a hijra identity represents a lived experience that destabilizes the conventional male-female divide. Judith Butler's concept of performativity, articulated in *Gender Trouble*, provides a critical framework for understanding this transformation. Butler contends that gender is "an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" (191), emphasizing that it is produced through performance rather than determined by biology. Anjum's journey illustrates this principle: her gender identity emerges through ongoing choices and acts, revealing the instability of normative gender categories.

Roy portrays Anjum's identity as both fluid and socially fraught, highlighting her struggles with rejection, stigma, and marginalization. Despite societal exclusion, Anjum asserts her identity through her appearance, speech, and chosen community. As Butler observes, the disruption of performative norms exposes their constructed nature: "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame" (43). Anjum's refusal to conform to these imposed norms underscores the limitations of regulatory frameworks and opens space for imagining gender beyond binary constraints. Her narrative thus functions not only as an account of personal affirmation but also as a broader critique of

the social and political structures that enforce gender normativity, illustrating the intimate connection between self-expression and resistance.

The Hijra Community: Liminality, Resistance, and Biopolitical Exclusion

Roy situates the hijra community as a collective site of both exclusion and resistance. Historically placed at the periphery of Indian society—often revered in ritual contexts yet excluded from civil rights—the hijra community reflects Foucault’s idea of biopolitics—a system of control that manages people by regulating their bodies, identities, and spaces. As Foucault states, modern power is “exercised through its ability to foster life or disallow it to the point of death” (*The History of Sexuality* 138). The hijras, denied access to education, healthcare, and employment, are subjected to a systemic denial of their right to exist within normative structures.

Yet, within this exclusion, Roy highlights the agency of the hijra community. Anjum’s integration into the Khwabgah—a shared sanctuary of hijras and other social outcasts—illustrates the formation of alternative kinship networks that challenge the heteronormative family ideal. The Khwabgah becomes a Foucauldian “counter-space,” where those who denied legitimacy by dominant institutions establish new forms of sociality and care. As Anjum later builds the Jannat Guest House, she extends this space of resistance, offering refuge not only to hijras but to all displaced individuals—symbolizing what Butler describes as “livable lives” outside the framework of social intelligibility (*Undoing Gender* 39).

Roy’s depiction of Anjum’s journey—from exclusion to self-definition—shows how resistance can exist even within systems of control. As Butler and Foucault note, power is never total; it always allows space for challenge. Through Anjum’s story, Roy presents a vision of strength that moves beyond rigid norms and imagines a community based on inclusion and fluid identity.

Gender Performativity and Biopolitical Regulation in Arundhati Roy's Fiction: A Theoretical Reading

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* offers a nuanced portrayal of marginalized identities negotiating the constraints of oppressive social systems. The novel lends itself to a productive analysis through Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity and Michel Foucault's theory of biopolitics. Through characters such as Anjum and other figures at the social margins, Roy exposes how normative structures exert regulatory power over bodies and identities, while acts of defiance and self-fashioning disrupt these mechanisms. The narrative reveals the entanglement of gender, caste, and class, forming a critical framework through which resistance and subversion emerge within systems of domination.

Judith Butler's Lens: Gender Performativity and Anjum's Subversion

Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble*, disrupts traditional views by presenting gender performativity as a challenge to the belief in gender as a natural or essential trait. Butler argues that gender is "an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" (191), emphasizing that gender norms are maintained through performative behaviors rather than biological determinism. In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Anjum's gender identity exemplifies a radical disruption of these norms. Born Aftab and later identifying as a hijra, Anjum resists the binary gender roles imposed by both her family and society.

Her rejection of a normative male identity and her choice to live in the Khwabgah—a space of chosen family among other hijras—constitutes what Butler terms a "subversive repetition" of gender (145). By inhabiting a space outside the male-female binary, Anjum exposes the artificiality of those categories. Her life becomes, in Butler's words, "a critique of the naturalization of gender norms" (Butler 44), rearticulating identity not as compliance but as agency and authenticity.

Foucault's Biopolitics and the Regulation of Bodies

Foucault's biopolitical analysis allows us to perceive how Roy's India disciplines and categorizes bodies. The novel exposes how institutions—religion, caste, and the nation-state—govern the 'acceptable' citizen while excluding the deviant. The hijra body, the Muslim body, and the Dalit body become sites of surveillance and exclusion. Scholars like Javeed Ahmad Raina and Danish Suleman argue that Roy critiques the ways in which Indian society polices bodily difference, transforming gender and caste into mechanisms of control (Raina 7; Suleman and Rehman 4).

Anjum's relocation to the graveyard also resonates with Foucault's idea of heterotopic resistance. Spaces like the Jannat Guest House invert social hierarchies, enabling coexistence beyond normative order. Roy's narrative insists that such counter-spaces, while marginal, possess radical potential. They represent life outside the state's biopolitical control—a life in the interstices of visibility and invisibility.

Intersectionality: Gender, Caste, and Class in Roy's Narrative Worlds

The interplay of gender, caste, and class forms a central axis in understanding Roy's critique of systemic hierarchies. Her narratives depict how individuals who occupy multiple marginalized positions—such as women, Dalits, and gender-nonconforming persons—are subjected to layered forms of exclusion and violence. Anjum's position as a hijra intersects with her Muslim identity and socio-economic vulnerability, illustrating how oppression is neither singular nor static but accumulative and relational.

This complex web of subjugation aligns with the theoretical framework of intersectionality, which emphasizes how distinct social categories—such as gender, caste, and class—intersect to generate interlocking systems of domination. Drawing on Butler and Foucault, these identities emerge not as isolated markers but as interdependent constructs produced and maintained within power relations. Butler's observation that "gender is not

always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts” (*Gender Trouble* 3) resonates with the fluid, transitional nature of Anjum’s subjectivity. Foucault’s notion of biopolitical regulation, wherein institutions control the life and death of marginalized bodies, further clarifies how Roy’s characters are subjected to disciplinary and exclusionary mechanisms.

Ultimately, Roy’s narrative strategies illuminate the endurance and agency of those at the social margins. Through acts of care, solidarity, and defiance, her characters reclaim spaces of belonging against the structures that seek to erase them. Their lived resistance transforms personal suffering into political critique, rendering their existence both performative and insurgent.

Literary Agency as a Social Critique

Roy’s narrative style turns the novel itself into a form of resistance. By using a fragmented structure and multiple voices, she challenges official, linear versions of history. The presence of different narrators—Anjum, Tilo, and Musa—creates a collective voice that rejects centralized control. This reflects Butler’s and Foucault’s view that power and agency exist in relation to one another. Agency is not complete freedom but the ability to act within limits. The choices of Anjum and Tilo—through care, memory, and storytelling—represent ethical forms of resistance within systems of oppression.

Binod Aryal identifies this as “reading polity from the margin,” where literature exposes hidden forms of governance (Aryal 79). Roy’s narrative compassion becomes a form of political critique, foregrounding empathy as a radical mode of engagement. Her fiction transforms private suffering into collective resistance, asserting that storytelling itself is a biopolitical act—one that that reclaims visibility to those who are marginalized and denied the right to be mourned.

The Question of Agency

Both Butler and Foucault challenge the notion of a sovereign subject. For Butler, agency arises in the repeated performance of social norms; for Foucault, it emerges in the cracks of disciplinary systems. In Roy's novel, agency manifests through relationality—Anjum's caretaking, Tilo's quiet defiance, and the community's shared acts of remembrance. Though circumscribed, these acts reveal how resistance persists even within structures of domination. Agency, therefore, emerges not through outright rejection of dominant structures but through their internal redefinition. Roy's characters navigate and transform the very conditions of their limitation, exemplifying Butler's concept of "subversive repetition."

Women, Gendered Spaces and Marginality

Combining the ideas of Butler and Foucault offers a deeper understanding of gendered marginalization in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. In the novel, gendered experience is shaped not only by personal acts of resistance but also by the ways individuals are formed and limited within systems of social norms and power. Butler's concept of performativity shows that gender is created through repeated social actions, while Foucault's idea of biopower explains how these social systems manage and control bodies and identities through everyday practices of regulation.

Apart from Anjum, Tilo is another character who negotiates her agency within political and emotional constraints. Her acts of remembering, documenting, and caring—especially her preservation of Musa's memories and her quiet defiance of state surveillance (238)—show how resistance can emerge from within systems of control. Foucault's view that power is productive rather than purely repressive is reflected in these subtle, situated forms of agency.

Thus, agency in Roy's novel must be understood as constrained and contextual—exercised within fields of power, not outside them. The lives of Anjum, Tilo, and other marginalized figures dramatize the constant tension between normative regulation and

subversive performance, between bodies made docile and those that resist, between intelligible genders and those rendered abject. Through this, Roy transforms literary agency into a mode of social critique, making visible the lives, identities, and desires that dominant systems seek to erase.

Mechanisms of Regulation, Exclusion and Surveillance

Foucault's concepts of the panopticon, discipline, and normative power are evident in Roy's depiction of institutional violence—military operations in Kashmir, caste lynchings, marginalized women's incarceration, and discrimination against transgender individuals. As noted in the essay "Reflection of the Panopticon," Roy's narrative mirrors the logic of surveillance and control described by Foucault, in which the bodies of marginalized groups—Kashmiris, Dalits, and hijras—are continually observed, disciplined, and regulated (Foucault). The regulatory power of the state and society is also apparent in how gendered identities are policed: expectations of heteronormativity, sexual respectability, caste-based purity, and religious conformity exclude those who deviate from these norms. Butler's notion of intelligibility is useful here, as those who fall outside the normative grid risk being read as socially abject and unlivable (Butler 34). In Roy's novel, the hijra body, the Dalit body, and the Muslim body in a Hindu majoritarian context are rendered ungrievable, highlighting how regulatory power operates at the level of everyday life—through bodily behaviour, sexual identity, and spatial belonging.

Literary Agency as Social Critique and the Question of Agency

Agency within Regulation

The concept of agency in marginalised literature is complex; it cannot be viewed simply as an individual hero fighting against power, since power is pervasive and deeply ingrained in social structures. As Butler cautions, the subject is constituted within normative frameworks, so agency is never wholly free. Similarly, Foucault suggests that power is productive, not

simply repressive: it creates subjects and their possibilities of action. Therefore, literary agency must be thought of in relation to power, subjectivation, normativity and resistance.

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Roy employs narrative form, structure, and character agency to critique social injustice. The novel's narrative voice, its interweaving of marginalized lives, its non-linear structure, and shifting spatial settings together create a literary form of resistance. These techniques challenge dominant national narratives, caste hierarchies, and gender binaries. Characters like Anjum, Tilo, Musa, and Zainab, among others, do not merely wait for rescue; they create communities, inhabit heterotopic spaces, speak their truths, and care for one another. Their agency may be small and contingent, but it remains significant. In this sense, Roy's novel enacts what Binod Aryal describes as "reading polity from the margin" (Aryal 78).

Limits and Possibilities of Agency

Yet agency is constrained. Roy does not present a simplistic triumph of resistance; rather she shows the material consequences of marginalisation, violence, and exclusion. The state apparatus, caste forces, patriarchal norms continue to exert pressure. For example, Anjum's life is marked by loss, hardship, violence; Tilo's mixed heritage, conflict zone origin, gender all make her vulnerable. These constraints reflect that while agency is possible, it is partial, contingent, situated. Thus, in Roy's novel, literary agency becomes a form of social critique by revealing the operations of social norms. It disrupts dominant ways of thinking and encourages readers to see how gender is constructed, how institutions enforce control, and how marginality and agency are closely connected.

Conclusion

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is a powerful reflection on how power, identity, and resistance are interconnected. Through its fragmented structure, multiple voices, and focus on marginalized lives, the novel uncovers how gender, caste, religion, and

sexuality are controlled in modern India. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of performativity and Michel Foucault's idea of biopolitics, it shows how individuals are shaped by systems of power but also find ways to resist them.

Anjum's journey from Aftab to the founder of the Jannat Guest House illustrates the struggle between control and self-definition. Her transformation shows that gender and identity are not fixed but continually created through social performance and resistance. Similarly, Tilo's quiet acts of memory and defiance represent another form of resistance within systems of oppression. Both characters embody Butler's idea of "subversive repetition," using the very norms that confine them to create space for change.

Roy's narrative transforms fiction into a political act—a space where silenced bodies and excluded voices regain visibility. By representing hijras, Dalits, Muslims, women, and other marginalized figures, she compels readers to confront what Butler terms "the ungrievable life." The novel's heterotopic spaces—the Khwabgah, the Jannat Guest House, and the graveyard—become counter-sites of care and solidarity that challenge dominant hierarchies of purity, citizenship, and belonging.

Through the combined lens of Butler and Foucault, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* emerges as a powerful critique of power and a redefinition of agency. Roy shows that resistance does not exist outside systems of control but operates within them—through compassion, storytelling, and community. In this way, literary agency becomes a form of social critique, exposing how norms are constructed and imagining a world where difference itself becomes the foundation of belonging. Roy's novel thus transforms marginality into a language of resilience, empathy, and hope.

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