

# Discarded and Resilient: Anjum's Queer Motherhood in The Ministry of Utmost Happiness

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## Abstract:

In 'The Ministry of Utmost Happiness' Arundhati Roy presents one of the least conventional mothers in Anjum who is a transsexual person from New Delhi. In this abstract, we focus on Anjum as the discarded mother figure and the concept of queer mothering in Roy's work. Anjum's transformation occurs in the context of social exclusion and individual suffering through action that speaks to both her trans status and her motherhood. Since she is Gender-nonconforming, Anjum feels rejected by her birth family and gains her family like situation in the house for the transsexually called "khwabgah", where she also becomes maternal figure for other neglected people of the society. The two major themes that come out through the experiences of Anjum relate to breaking barriers normally associated with parenthood, especially motherhood. Anjum has the intrinsic maternal feeling and an innate desire to care for many people outside her immediate family whom she takes under her wings. But, once again, Anjum's voyage is painful – she struggles, loses those she loves, and suffers throughout her search for her kidnapped and fostered son. This aspect of her story is a clear portrayal of the struggles shared by Queer folk aspiring to parenthood in a society that barely acknowledges their relationships and – by extension – the rights of their children. Drawing focus on Anjum, "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness" wanted to map out the courage and tenacity of queer motherhood up against the struggles it encompasses. At HER journey, Roy also manages to portray how love and Kinship trump cultural norms to bring about a different definition of a family. In this abstract, proper focus will be made on representing Anjum as the second-class mother and discussing the experience of the queer motherhood, which is presented by Roy, as a unique opportunity to destabilize the hegemonic notions of the parenthood and family construction.

**Keywords:** Queer, Motherhood, Discard, Identity, Resilience, Marginalization

## Introduction

Anjum – a eunuch living in Delhi – is the central character in Arundhati Roy's novel, "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness." In her story, Anjum highlights the issues of marginalization, individual fight and having dual identity as both transgender and mother. Focusing on discard studies, this research paper seeks to discuss Anjum's representation as an abandoned mother and explore more about the queer maternity that appears in Roy's writing.

## Discard Studies: Theoretical Framework

Discard studies is an interdisciplinary field that examines the societal processes and implications of waste, disposability, and exclusion. It addresses how certain people, practices, and objects are deemed unnecessary or unworthy within specific socio-cultural contexts. The central premise of discard studies is that waste and disposability are not just physical by-products but also social and cultural phenomena

deeply embedded in systems of power, inequality, and societal values. Discard studies investigates how societies determine what is valuable and what is not. This includes looking at cultural norms and practices that influence these perceptions. Just as objects can be deemed disposable, so too can people. The field looks at how certain populations (e.g., the homeless, immigrants, or the elderly) are marginalized and excluded. Stigmatization of particular groups can lead to their exclusion.

The aspiration of being a mother is sated by adopting children though illegally. To quote Chandini, a transgender activist, “the day Hasini came into my life, doors of heavens opened for me. All the pain given by this society was gone. I had become a mother and I had to show to the world that to be a mother, all you need is to give love. Nothing else matters. Not even gender” (New Indian Express). But when it comes to discussion of trans- mothers, society seems to worry about the impact on children. Assumptions are made that it will somehow confuse or harm children, or perhaps influence the child to become transgender themselves. However, researches show that transgender parents have overwhelmingly positive relationships with their children. A change is in the air to accept the concept of trans- mothers and changing concept of motherhood. The notion of sacrificing, renouncing and forfeiting mother who does not go beyond the framework of family is fading. Instead, a human being who exhibits qualities like care, love, and patience can be called as mother. It is a passion which goes beyond the limits of gender. “It is a feeling of caring and nurturing another individual and it can be experienced by anyone, not just the one who gave birth to the individual in question (Sawant).

### **Queer Motherhood as a Discarded Case.**

The voice of dissent present in queer literature breaks the structural social hegemony. As it disintegrates, the religious and the state’s control over sexuality withers away. However, queer literature does not present a readymade solution to the problems faced by these sexual subalterns but it becomes their space to thrive and celebrate their identities (Chakraborty, 386).

Societies often operate within a heteronormative framework that prioritizes heterosexual relationships and traditional family structures. Queer individuals and non-traditional family setups are frequently marginalized and deemed less valid. Queer parents often face symbolic erasure where their identities and roles as parents are not recognized or valued. This erasure reflects a broader societal tendency to discard non-conforming identities and family structures. Many legal systems fail to recognize the parental rights of queer individuals, especially in countries where same-sex marriage or adoption by queer individuals is not legalized. This legal erasure is type of social exclusion, making queer parents assimilate to the state’s portrait of their status as spectral or supplementary. Queer people are first and foremost made to feel like pariahs, and when society does begrudgingly accept them as parents, it is with the caveat that they are inherently unfit or somehow unnatural. They are symbolically regarded as easily disposable which is embodied by the stigmatization of asylums for the mentally ill. Hetero- normative marriage, denials of queer people’s right to reproduce, bans on their use of reproductive technologies, and other public health policies that seek to limit or erase queer people’s reproductive rights are technologies of disposability. It is evident that queer parents are still discriminated and as such they encounter significant challenges trying to access resources such as health care, education, and the law with regard to their families. They may contribute to the continuity of social and economical inequality that is characterized by limited information access. The lack of pro-queer support structures means that queer families may struggle to find the support structures they need or expect, like their more mainstream heterosexual counterparts. This is because other forms of oppression arise alongside queer oppression, even if at different degrees depending on race, class,

and disability among other factors. Intersectionality shows that queer means that such persons are even more disposable, and in such a society claiming the worthiness and rights of parenthood by queer folks is unheard of. As we speak, there are equal emerging organizations that support queer parents and their children. These movements seek to redefine the dynamics of queer adoption in law courts and in society that stereotype and erase queer parenting. As more content creators and authors share their stories and portrayals of queer parents, such roles can serve as models and become more accepted in society. Positive representations serve to counter-prejudice and desensitize perceptions so that people become more accepting and aware of these individuals.

### **Anjum: A Discarded Mother**

Anjum's character in the novel by Arundhati Roy, "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness" provides an excellent example of a discarded mother in the sense of discard studies. With its emphasis on processes and consequence of waste, disposability and erasure, discard studies sheds light to the systematic erasure that Anjum undergoes as a queer person and a parent.

### **Anjum's Identity and Marginalization**

#### **Gender and Queerness:**

**Hijra Identity:** Anjum is a hijra, they are group of gender outlaws in South Asian culture that belong to the third gender or are intersexuals. The hijras are also socially ostracized as most of them can never have a normal job or even gain employment out in the community. I wish to note here that they remain marginal, though not entirely shunned or repudiated; they are outside, beyond the mainstream of society in India. The hijra status is very well incorporated within the fluidity of Anjum's character and the narration of her life in "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness." Originally known as Aftab, she deeply suffers from socially imposed gender roles, feeling homosexual despite being biologically male. The point wherein she joins the coresident hijra community—a gender minority in South Asia—represents her ultimate morphosis.

"I'm a Hijra. I don't fit here. Not in the family, not in the factory, not anywhere."

Through living as a hijra, Anjum has been marginalized and excluded from mainstream society's norms and thus denied her rights and dignity. Sexual harassment at the workplace, threats, physical and verbal abuse and violation of human rights are well illustrated by the main character in the movie who lacks social acceptance, is a lowly paid worker and struggles to be recognized and receive proper respect. In spite of all the misfortunes that the protagonist faces in her life, Anjum demonstrates commendable strength. Her migration to the graveyard is a relevant act of rebellion – she opens the Jannat Guest House there. This sanctuary becomes a shelter for such other unwanted outcasts of society like children who were left by their parents and other hijras ultimately representing the process of the construction of a new community of 'acceptable' belonging.

Reading the kind of life Anjum and her group has, one learns a lot about the fight of the third sex in India against the regularity and prejudice of the society. She is an inexhaustible source of opposition to being discarded and her resilience concatenates gender identity, and justice. Here, by merging Anjum's story into the larger narrative of Roy's magnum opus, readers get a unique frosted lens view of the gender issues and the strength of the human spirit against a backdrop of oppression.

#### **Symbolic Disposability:**

While Anjum's hijra identity is positioned as being worthless according to the heteronormative order, she is symbolically used up in the process. She deconstructs what it means to be male or female and as such,

she is either not visible in society or is an outcast. The societal stand on marginalized persons is vividly portrayed in “The Ministry of Utmost Happiness” through the disposal of Anjum’s character. After being born as Aftab and transitioning to embrace hijra culture, Anjum has to live in a world that does not accommodate for gender fluidity, which results in her life symbolizing disposability. The presence of Hijras raises the feeling of fear, curiosity and disdain among the society; hence hijras are simply excluded from the frame work of our society.

“He’ s a She. He’ s not a He or a She. He’ s a He and a She. She-He, He-She. Hee! Hee! Hee!” (Roy 11). From the social perspective, Anjum remains alienated from society and experiences economic instability. Her mild rebellion manifested in her refusing to conform to traditional femininity, and thus, she is ostracized by her family and society. This erasure is compounded with restricted access to employment and rights, rendering hijras as not only unwanted but also useless within the economic sphere. The act of Anjum shifting to the graveyard – which is a part of the city that is dominated by death and oblivion – perfectly encapsulates her social rejection.

Nevertheless, in this situation, Anjum is impossibly spirited and tenacious. From the fact that the protagonist set up the Jannat Guest House in a graveyard, she makes a home for herself and other rejected individuals such as warrant children and hijras. Such an act of reclamation counters her symbolic use and throw away nature and emphasizes her active practice of making the world more welcoming. Anjum’s story in Roy’s narrative highlights the production of the throwaway culture, and in the same breath embraces the struggle as well as triumph of the human spirit in regaining one’s worth and dignity

### **Motherhood and Non-traditional Family Structures:**

**Adoption of Zainab:** Anjum’s decision to adopt a child, Zainab, and raise her within the hijra community, defies traditional notions of family and motherhood. This non-conformity further marginalizes her in a society that upholds rigid definitions of parenthood. In “The Ministry of Utmost Happiness,” Anjum’s adoption of Zainab is a profound act of love and defiance against societal norms. Zainab, an abandoned baby found in a garbage bin, symbolizes the ultimate form of societal discard. Anjum, a hijra who herself has been marginalized and symbolically disposed of by society, takes Zainab into her care, challenging the deeply ingrained prejudices about parenthood, gender, and worthiness.

The act of adopting Zainab is significant on multiple levels. It defies the conventional notions of family and motherhood, as Anjum, a transgender woman, claims her right to be a mother despite societal rejections of her identity. Anjum’s love and care for Zainab are unwavering, providing the child with a nurturing environment within the hijra community, which itself is a marginalized group.

“To what extent,” she asks, “do regulatory practices of gender formation and division constitute identity, the internal coherence of the subject, indeed, the self- identical status of the person?” (Gender Trouble 16).

Through this adoption, Roy highlights the themes of resilience and reclamation. Anjum’s decision to mother Zainab not only gives the child a chance at life but also serves as a reclamation of her own identity and humanity. It challenges the societal structures that deem both hijras and discarded children as unworthy, presenting a powerful narrative of inclusion and acceptance. Anjum’s motherhood redefines familial bonds, demonstrating that love and care transcend traditional gender and societal expectations.

### **Struggle for Recognition:**

I'm all of them, I'm Romi and Juli, I'm Laila and Majnu. And Mujna, why not? Who says my name is Anjum? I'm not Anjum, I'm Anjuman. I'm a mehfil, I'm a gathering. Of everybody and nobody, of everything and nothing. Is there anyone else you would like to invite? Everyone's invited (4).

As a hijra mother, Anjum's legitimacy and worth as a parent are constantly questioned. This struggle for recognition highlights the systemic exclusion faced by queer parents. In "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness," Anjum's journey as a queer mother encapsulates a profound struggle for recognition amidst societal and institutional barriers. As a hijra, she faces pervasive social stigma and exclusion, which extend to her role as a mother to Zainab, whom she adopts after finding her abandoned. Anjum's identity challenges traditional norms of gender and parenthood, leading to profound legal and societal challenges. Her quest for recognition as Zainab's mother is marked by bureaucratic hurdles and institutional discrimination that deny her parental rights and legitimacy. The lack of legal frameworks recognizing non-traditional families further complicates her situation, reinforcing her symbolic disposability in society's eyes.

Despite these adversities, Anjum demonstrates resilience and determination. Through the establishment of the Jannat Guest House, she creates a community that embraces marginalized identities and challenges societal norms. This act of creating a supportive environment not only nurtures her own identity as a mother but also symbolizes a broader resistance against systemic injustices and exclusions faced by queer individuals. Anjum's narrative in the novel serves as a poignant critique of societal norms and a call for greater acceptance and recognition of diverse forms of parenthood and family structures.

## Processes of Disposability

### Social and Cultural Exclusion:

**Community Rejection:** Anjum's hijra identity leads to her being discarded by her family and mainstream society. Her experience reflects a broader cultural tendency to discard individuals who do not conform to societal norms. In "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness," Anjum experiences profound community rejection due to her identity as a hijra, which deeply influences her life and narrative. From her early years grappling with her gender identity to her decision to live openly as a hijra in Delhi, Anjum faces pervasive social ostracization and marginalization.

"It was the only place in his world where he felt the air made way for him" (19)

Anjum's community rejection begins within her own family, who struggle to accept her as she transitions from Aftab to Anjum. This initial rejection sets the stage for broader societal exclusion, where Anjum and other hijras are seen as deviant and outside the norms of mainstream society. The hijra community itself, while providing a sense of belonging, is often relegated to the margins of society, living on the fringes and facing discrimination in employment, healthcare, and housing.

Anjum's move to the graveyard and the establishment of the Jannat Guest House can be seen as a response to this rejection, creating a space where marginalized individuals, including hijras like herself, find solace and community. This act of defiance and resilience highlights Anjum's determination to forge her own path despite societal disdain, challenging norms and advocating for acceptance and dignity for all marginalized communities. Through Anjum's narrative, Arundhati Roy critiques societal prejudices and the consequences of community rejection while celebrating the strength and solidarity found in marginalized communities.

**Living in the Graveyard:** Anjum's move to the graveyard, where she builds her own community, symbolizes her physical and social displacement. The graveyard, a space for the dead, underscores her

status as someone society has metaphorically ‘buried’ and forgotten. In "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness," Anjum’s move to the graveyard symbolizes both physical and symbolic reclamation. After facing profound rejection and marginalization due to her identity as a hijra, Anjum seeks refuge in a graveyard in Delhi. This unconventional choice reflects her desire to create a space where she can live on her own terms, away from the societal norms that have excluded her.

“She lived in the graveyard like a tree. At dawn she saw the crows off and welcomed the bats home. At dusk she did the opposite. Between shifts she conferred with the ghosts of vultures that loomed in her high branches.”( Roy 7)

The graveyard becomes a sanctuary where Anjum establishes the Jannat Guest House, a haven for marginalized individuals like herself. It serves not only as a place of residence but also as a community center where discarded and forgotten souls find belonging and solidarity. Anjum’s decision to inhabit a graveyard, typically associated with death and finality, transforms it into a space of life, resilience, and defiance against societal rejection. It symbolizes her resilience and determination to carve out a meaningful existence despite societal prejudices and exclusion.

### **Economic and Institutional Barriers:**

**Economic Marginalization:** As a hijra, Anjum faces economic hardships and limited opportunities. The lack of economic resources and institutional support for hijras further perpetuates their disposability. In "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness," Anjum experiences significant economic marginalization due to societal discrimination against hijras and her non-conforming gender identity. As a hijra, Anjum faces limited opportunities for stable employment and economic advancement. Many employers are reluctant to hire hijras, perpetuating their economic vulnerability and dependence on informal and often exploitative sources of income.

Anjum’s economic struggles are compounded by her decision to live independently in a graveyard, which lacks basic amenities and infrastructure. This choice reflects both her rejection of mainstream society and the economic realities faced by marginalized communities. Without access to stable housing and employment, Anjum relies on the support of her chosen family within the hijra community and the makeshift economy they sustain.

Furthermore, the legal and bureaucratic barriers she encounters exacerbate her economic marginalization. Lack of official recognition as a legitimate citizen and parent limits her access to social services and economic opportunities available to mainstream society. Despite these challenges, Anjum demonstrates resilience by establishing the Jannat Guest House, where she fosters a supportive community that provides mutual aid and solidarity to its marginalized residents.

### **Intersecting Identities:**

**Caste and Class:** Anjum’s experiences are shaped not only by her gender identity but also by the intersections of caste and class. These compounded identities amplify her marginalization and disposability. In "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness," Anjum's identity is shaped by both her caste and class background, adding layers of complexity to her experiences as a marginalized hijra in Indian society. Born into a Muslim family of the dalit community, Anjum faces multiple forms of discrimination based on her caste and socio-economic status.

Her dalit identity positions her at the bottom of the caste hierarchy, subjected to systemic oppression and social exclusion. This marginalization intersects with her hijra identity, compounding her experiences of

discrimination and reinforcing her status as a societal outcast. Despite these challenges, Anjum exhibits resilience and agency, navigating through the complexities of identity and societal norms.

The novel portrays Anjum's journey as she asserts her identity and strives for autonomy, challenging societal norms and advocating for inclusivity. Through Anjum's narrative, Arundhati Roy illuminates the intersecting dimensions of caste, class, and gender identity, shedding light on the profound inequalities embedded within Indian society.

**Religious Identity:** Anjum, being a Muslim, also faces religious discrimination, adding another layer to her marginalization. The intersection of religion, gender, and class creates a complex web of exclusion. In "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness," Anjum's religious identity as a Muslim plays a significant role in shaping her experiences and interactions within the broader societal context of India. Born into a Muslim family, Anjum's religious identity intersects with her other marginalized identities, such as her hijra identity and her dalit caste background.

Anjum's Muslim identity is portrayed through her cultural practices, beliefs, and interactions with other characters who come from diverse religious backgrounds. In the novel, her religious identity is not explicitly foregrounded as a central theme in the same way as her gender identity or caste background. However, her Muslim identity influences her relationships and interactions within the complex socio-political landscape of the novel.

Given the diverse religious fabric of Indian society, Anjum's Muslim identity contributes to the nuanced portrayal of identity politics and communal dynamics that permeate the narrative. It adds another layer to her multifaceted character, highlighting the intersectionality of identities that shape her experiences of marginalization, resilience, and community-building in "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness."

### **Creating Inclusive Spaces:**

**Jannat Guest House:** Anjum's establishment of the Jannat Guest House in the graveyard is an act of resistance against her disposability. It becomes a sanctuary for other marginalized individuals, including hijras, abandoned children, and political dissidents. In "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness," the Jannat Guest House is a sanctuary created by Anjum in a graveyard in Delhi. This unique refuge symbolizes hope, resilience, and defiance against societal exclusion. Anjum, who faces profound marginalization as a hijra, transforms this desolate space into a vibrant community hub for the outcast and marginalized, including abandoned children, political dissidents, and fellow hijras.

The Jannat Guest House serves as a counter-narrative to societal norms, offering a safe haven where diverse individuals find acceptance and solidarity. Its location in a graveyard, a place traditionally associated with death, contrasts with the life and vitality fostered within its walls. This transformation underscores Anjum's ability to create meaning and community from spaces of disposability. Through the Jannat Guest House, Arundhati Roy explores themes of belonging, resilience, and the redefinition of home and family, highlighting the power of marginalized individuals to reclaim and redefine their identities and spaces.

**Community and Solidarity:** The guest house symbolizes a reclaimed space where discarded individuals find community and solidarity. It challenges societal norms by creating an inclusive environment that values and recognizes diverse identities. In "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness," community and solidarity are central themes that highlight the power of collective resilience among marginalized individuals. Anjum, who faces rejection due to her hijra identity, creates the Jannat Guest House in a Delhi

graveyard as a sanctuary for outcasts. This space becomes a vibrant community where hijras, abandoned children, and political dissidents find acceptance and mutual support.

The Jannat Guest House embodies solidarity, providing a sense of belonging and family to those whom society has discarded. Anjum's initiative underscores the importance of communal bonds in resisting systemic oppression and fostering dignity among marginalized groups. The diverse inhabitants of the guest house support one another, forming a network of care and empathy that transcends societal boundaries. Through this portrayal, Arundhati Roy illustrates how marginalized communities can create inclusive spaces of solidarity, redefining notions of home and family while challenging societal norms of exclusion and disposability.

### **Quest for Biological Connection:**

In "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness," the quest for biological connection is a recurring theme that underscores the deep human desire for belonging and identity. Anjum's journey reflects this quest, as she grapples with her hijra identity and her place within her biological family and the broader societal fabric. Her adoption of Zainab highlights a different form of biological connection—one forged not by blood but by love and care.

Other characters in the novel, like Tilo, also navigate complex familial relationships, searching for connections that validate their identities and existence. The narrative reveals how these quests for biological ties are often fraught with challenges due to societal prejudices and rigid norms.

Roy uses these stories to critique the conventional emphasis on biological connections, suggesting that true belonging and identity can transcend genetic ties. The novel celebrates the chosen families and communities that provide acceptance, love, and a sense of home, challenging the traditional notions of kinship and biological determinism.

### **Conclusion**

Anjum's character in "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness" exemplifies the concept of a discarded mother within the framework of discard studies. Her experiences of marginalization, based on her hijra identity and non-traditional motherhood, illustrate the systemic processes that render certain people disposable. However, Anjum's resilience and the creation of inclusive spaces like the Jannat Guest House also demonstrate resistance to these processes. By examining Anjum's story through the lens of discard studies, we gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of social exclusion and the potential for reclaiming dignity and recognition in the face of systemic marginalization.

Anjum's journey highlights the pervasive societal prejudice that deems queer parents unworthy and disposable. Despite her unwavering love and commitment to her adopted daughter, Zainab, Anjum encounters numerous barriers, from legal and bureaucratic hurdles to social ostracization. Her experience reflects a broader societal reluctance to accept and validate the parenting roles of queer individuals, perpetuating their marginalization and invisibility.

The establishment of the Jannat Guest House in a graveyard symbolizes Anjum's defiance against this disposability. It becomes a sanctuary where marginalized individuals, including herself, can find acceptance and solidarity. By creating a space that embraces non-traditional family structures, Anjum not only reclaims her identity as a mother but also challenges the societal norms that seek to exclude her.

In conclusion, Anjum's portrayal as a queer mother in "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness" serves as a compelling critique of the systemic forces that marginalize and discard non-conforming identities. Her



resilience in the face of exclusion highlights the importance of recognizing and valuing diverse forms of parenthood. Roy's novel ultimately calls for a more inclusive society that honors the dignity and worth of all individuals, regardless of their gender or sexual orientation, and redefines the concept of family to encompass all forms of love and care.

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