

Motherhood Redefined in Roy's *The Ministry Of Utmost Happiness*

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ABSTRACT

Arundhati Roy writes of her mother, the ever enigmatic Mary Roy “in these pages, my mother; my gangster; shall live. She was my shelter and my storm.” The ferocity with which Mary Roy is presented in the memoir “Mother Mary Comes to Me” also sheds light on all other mother(ly) characters of the Roy Universe. This paper specifically deals with the character of Anjum and the politics of her motherhood in the novel “*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*”.

The *Ministry of Utmost Happiness* by Arundhati Roy offers a radical reconfiguration of motherhood by detaching it from biological determinism, heteronormativity, and patriarchal ideals. The novel interrogates dominant cultural narratives that define motherhood as a natural, self-sacrificing, and domestically confined role, instead presenting it as a chosen, ethical, and deeply political practice. Through the character of Anjum, a hijra who adopts an abandoned child, Roy dismantles normative assumptions about gender, reproduction, and maternal legitimacy. Anjum's motherhood emerges not from biological reproduction but from a boiling resistance, thereby expanding the meaning of maternal identity beyond the female body and the politics of it.

The novel challenges biologically determinist models of motherhood by relocating maternal legitimacy from reproduction to choice, care, and ethical responsibility. The novel further foregrounds surrogate, collective, and queer forms of mothering in contexts shaped by state violence, caste oppression, and militarization.

By situating maternal care in unconventional spaces Roy reimagines motherhood as a form of radical empathy and survival. These alternative maternal networks challenge the privatization of care and propose nurturing as a collective, transformative force. It takes a village to raise a child and Roy very deftly shows the reader that sometimes that village is a graveyard and other times protest sites.

Ultimately, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* reconceptualizes motherhood not as a fixed biological destiny, but as a fluid, ethical, and political mode of being that resists exclusionary social structures. Through this reframing, Roy positions motherhood as an act of dissent that unsettles rigid identities and reclaims humanity within conditions of profound injustice.

INTRODUCTION: REIMAGINING MOTHERHOOD IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S FICTION

The umbilical cord is never cut, it sits like a noose around our neck our whole lives and dictates what we morph into and more importantly what we actively dread morphing into. From Kafka to Ferrante to Roy to quotes on Pinterest, Motherhood remains a site of endless emotional and literary struggles. Motherhood in Arundhati Roy's fiction consistently emerges as a contested, unstable, and deeply political category rather than a naturalized or sentimental role. Across her literary and non-fictional writings, Roy interrogates dominant cultural narratives that idealize motherhood as biologically ordained, self-sacrificing, and confined to the private, domestic sphere. Instead, she presents maternal identities as forged within conditions of violence, inequality, and resistance, shaped by intersections of gender, caste, sexuality, and state power. In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Roy extends this interrogation by situating motherhood within unconventional spaces and non-normative bodies, thereby challenging patriarchal and heteronormative frameworks that regulate care, reproduction, and belonging. In this paper, the novel's portrayal of motherhood and womanhood as embraced by these two characters—cisgendered, heterosexual Tilo and hijra sex worker Anjum—represents a crucial tactic of resistance against the different hegemonic forces of the Indian nation-state, which are supported by heteropatriarchal institutions of power. In particular, the leitmotifs of motherhood and queer womanhood enact a ceremonial transgression of the standards of domesticated heteronormative marriage and motherhood, which form the cornerstones of contemporary Indian social and political life.

MARY ROY AND THE GENEALOGY OF RADICAL MOTHERHOOD

Reading Arundhati Roy is an experience in itself. Her representations are not merely representations made of “what was” they are made of “what is”. They are ever evolving and dissolving; her pages are living, breathing and aging. Thus the character of Mary Roy in the memoir *Mother Mary Comes to Me* (2025) has a soul, a soul that also has a body. This body of Mary Roy is in itself a site of struggle between her motherliness (or the lack thereof) and this intense heat and electricity of her being that is in violent separation from her kids. Asian Review of Books talks about the book

“the grit and depth of the subject, Mary Roy. Abusive, cruel, and above all else, a survivor. Mary Roy flits from catastrophic failures—at one point, the family of three was starving and squatting in a relative’s house only to eventually be kicked out—to legacy-defining successes; the Travancore Christian Succession Act, which stated that daughters had no right to their father’s property, was legally challenged before the Indian Supreme Court by Mary, and she won. Mary is, at every step of the way, impossible to understand—most of all for Arundhati Roy. It is the love, always mercurial, between the two of them that suspends the narrative, well supplemented with a wide array of side-characters ranging from a blind, violin-playing grandmother to a Marxist, factory-owning uncle.”

This Mary Roy remains a blueprint for all the mother(ly) characters that inhabit the Roy universe. Mary Roy is not memorialized as a nurturing, self-effacing maternal figure but as a contradictory, ferocious, and politically unsettling presence—“my shelter and my storm.” This ambivalent portrayal disrupts what Adrienne Rich terms the *institution of motherhood*, which idealizes maternal sacrifice, obedience, and emotional containment, while disciplining women into roles that sustain patriarchal social order. Mary Roy’s refusal to conform—to marriage, respectability, or emotional docility—positions her instead within what Rich identifies as the *experience of motherhood*: a lived, conflicted, and resistant site shaped by power relations rather than biology alone.

From a feminist theoretical perspective, Mary Roy’s maternal subjectivity exemplifies a form of *maternal dissidence* that refuses domestication. Her public legal battle against the Syrian Christian inheritance laws in Kerala foregrounds motherhood as a political identity that confronts patriarchal law and religious authority. In this sense, Mary Roy embodies what Sara Ahmed conceptualizes as the “feminist killjoy”—a woman whose refusal to uphold familial harmony exposes the violence embedded in normative social structures. Her maternal presence disrupts the fantasy of the family as a harmonious unit, revealing instead its function as a regulatory apparatus aligned with caste, religion, and property relations.

This radical maternal genealogy becomes crucial for understanding Roy’s fictional mothers, particularly Anjum in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Rather than emerging as isolated literary inventions, Roy’s maternal figures form a continuum of resistance that challenges what Judith Butler describes as the “normative frames of recognizability” governing gender, kinship, and care. Mary Roy’s motherhood is already queer in its defiance of affective expectations and gendered obedience; Anjum’s motherhood extends this queerness further by detaching maternal legitimacy from the female body altogether. Together, they constitute a lineage of mothering that rejects biological determinism and destabilizes heteronormative kinship structures.

Moreover, Mary Roy’s portrayal allows Roy to reconceptualize motherhood as an ethical stance rather than a biological function. Feminist theorists such as Joan Tronto and Carol Gilligan have emphasized care as a moral and political practice embedded within unequal power relations. Roy’s maternal figures align with this ethics-of-care framework, wherein responsibility, protection, and survival are enacted in conditions of precarity and conflict rather than domestic security. Mary Roy’s motherhood, marked by confrontation rather than comfort, sets the groundwork for Roy’s later fictional exploration of care as resistance in spaces abandoned by the state.

Thus, Mary Roy operates not merely as a biographical figure but as the ideological foundation of Roy’s radical maternal imagination. By foregrounding maternal ferocity, contradiction, and political engagement, Roy dismantles the myth of motherhood as inherently nurturing and apolitical. This genealogical link between Mary Roy and characters like Anjum enables *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* to envision motherhood as a disruptive force—one that unsettles patriarchal authority, reclaims ethical agency, and redefines care as an act of dissent.

ANJUM AS A MATERNAL SUBJECT: GENDER, QUEERNESS, AND CARE

Queering motherhood must attend, not only to motherhood as it occurs in overarching discourses and institutional restrictions, but also to everyday activities, material inequities, and embodied relationships. (Gibson 2014, 10)

Motherhood reconfigures the relationships between female adults and female children in Arundhati Roy’s novel. It involves not only queer women in terms of their sexual orientation or gender identity, but also women who embrace motherhood in unusual circumstances that frequently strongly defy the expectations of biologically induced motherhood or motherhood within the context of heteronormative marriage and heterosexual domestic partnerships. More precisely, the novel’s portrayal of queer parenting completely reframes adoptive relationships and makes it a legitimate means of defying systemic misogyny in a country enmeshed in a complex web of dictatorial influences. The novel’s adoptive relationships develop outside the boundaries of the legal and social systems. The characters of Anjum and Tilo (one, a hijra1 sex-worker and another, a cisgendered woman) embrace motherhood under extraordinary circumstances by rescuing two abandoned girl children from the steps of the iconic Jama Masjid and Jantar Mantar, a famous protest site in Delhi. Kelly Jeske’s description of her own experience as a mother of a biological son who is now

entering girlhood is similar to theirs: "a place of contradiction, as a borderland of complexity as a place I can stand in truth." Jeske (2014). In addition to highlighting the marginalization of motherhood as a relevant topic of study within the framework of queer theory, queer mothering could conduct a substantial critique of the sanctity of biological kinship and blood bonds. Queer theory views the patriarchal family as "an institution through which "abnormal" sexuality is regulated by the state," which is the main reason for this (Park 2013, 20). However, some motherhood studies scholars have precisely attempted to remedy this oversight by probing the theory and practices of non-biological, adoptive, and other non-normative forms of motherhood which in turn generate alternative models of family and kinship. We can reference Cherrie Moraga's influential work *Waiting in the Wings: Portrait of a Queer Motherhood* on her experiences with both adoptive and biological motherhood. In this regard, it may be apposite to emphasize the distinction between the terms, family and familia as theorized by Moraga in the book:

"Growing up, the we of my life was always defined by blood relations. We meant family.

We were my mother's children, my abuela's grandchildren, my tios' nieces and nephews. To this day, most of my cousins still hold onto a similar understanding of we. Not

I [...]

What Moraga alludes to as a familia in her work may be the most appropriate term to describe the utopian community of various marginalized subjects that come together in Arundhati Roy's novel to pose a dialectical counterpoint to a sociopolitical order sustained by pernicious, heteronormative practices in modern India.

BOILING RESISTANCE: MOTHERHOOD AS POLITICAL PRAXIS

Anjum's motherhood in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* does not emerge from biological reproduction but from a sustained confrontation with violence, abandonment, and exclusion. Her maternal identity is forged within what Adrienne Rich conceptualizes as resistance to the *institution of motherhood*—that is, the social system that regulates women's bodies, reproductive capacities, and affective labour in service of patriarchal and heteronormative norms. Anjum's position as a hijra places her entirely outside this institutional framework, rendering her illegible as a maternal subject within dominant social and legal imaginaries. Yet it is precisely this illegibility that allows her motherhood to function as a radical political praxis rather than a biologically mandated role.

Judith Butler's notion of *normative frames of recognizability* is particularly useful in understanding Anjum's maternal agency. Within heteropatriarchal logic, motherhood is intelligible only when aligned with cisgender femininity, heterosexual marriage, and reproductive biology. Anjum's adoption of Zainab radically disrupts these frames by asserting care, protection, and responsibility as sufficient grounds for maternal legitimacy. Her motherhood exposes the arbitrariness of the norms that govern kinship and belonging, revealing them as contingent mechanisms of social control rather than natural truths. In this sense, Anjum's maternal practice constitutes what Butler terms an *alternative kinship formation*—one that resists regulation by the state and refuses assimilation into normative family structures.

Anjum's motherhood is also deeply marked by what Sara Ahmed describes as *feminist and queer refusal*. Rather than seeking validation from legal or social institutions that have historically excluded hijras, Anjum refuses the demand to conform in order to be recognized as a mother. Her care work operates as a form of affective dissent: she nurtures life in spaces marked by death, precarity, and dispossession. This refusal to perform "acceptable" motherhood transforms maternal care into a site of political resistance, challenging the assumption that motherhood must be respectable, domesticated, and socially sanctioned.

Furthermore, Anjum's maternal praxis must be read within the context of what Achille Mbembe terms *necropolitics*—the state's power to expose certain populations to death, abandonment, and social erasure. As a hijra, Anjum inhabits a body already positioned at the margins of life itself. Her decision to mother an abandoned child within these conditions constitutes a counter-necropolitical act: a commitment to sustaining life where the state has withdrawn care, recognition, and protection. Motherhood, here, becomes an ethics of survival rather than an expression of reproductive futurity. It is not oriented toward preserving the nation or lineage but toward resisting the logics that render certain lives disposable.

This ethical dimension aligns with feminist theories of care articulated by scholars who frame care as a moral and political practice embedded within unequal power relations. Anjum's maternal labour is neither sentimental nor privatized; it is enacted publicly, communally, and under constant threat. By mothering in spaces such as graveyards and protest sites, Anjum reclaims care from the domestic sphere and repositions it as a collective, insurgent practice. Her motherhood thus operates as a slow, persistent, and embodied defiance that refuses both erasure and normalization.

Ultimately, Anjum's motherhood unsettles the fiction that care is apolitical or instinctual. Instead, Roy presents it as a deliberate ethical choice forged in response to structural violence. Through Anjum, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* reconceptualizes motherhood as a mode of political being—one that resists heteropatriarchal authority, challenges necropolitical power, and insists on the radical possibility of care as dissent.

MOTHERHOOD AS DISSENT: FLUIDITY, ETHICS, AND BECOMING

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Arundhati Roy interrogates the ideological alignment between motherhood, nationalism, and reproductive citizenship that underpins the modern Indian nation-state. Within nationalist discourse, motherhood is frequently

mobilized as a civic duty: women's reproductive capacities are tied to the preservation of community, caste, religion, and nation. This framework constructs what scholars term *reproductive citizenship*, wherein access to social legitimacy, protection, and belonging is conditional upon participation in heteronormative reproduction and familial respectability. Roy's representation of Anjum radically destabilizes this nexus by presenting a maternal subject who exists entirely outside the boundaries of reproductive citizenship yet performs maternal labour with ethical intensity and political consequence.

Judith Butler's critique of normative citizenship and recognizability offers a useful lens through which to read Anjum's maternal illegibility. As a hijra, Anjum is excluded from the nation's reproductive imagination; her body cannot be assimilated into nationalist narratives that equate femininity with biological reproduction and maternal sacrifice. Anjum's motherhood, therefore, does not secure her inclusion within the nation-state but instead exposes the exclusionary logic through which citizenship is distributed. By adopting and caring for a child without legal sanction or biological legitimacy, Anjum enacts a form of maternal belonging that refuses the state's authority to regulate kinship, reproduction, and care.

Roy further critiques nationalist reproductive logics by severing motherhood from futurity. Nationalist discourse relies heavily on the figure of the child as the symbolic future of the nation, rendering certain lives valuable only insofar as they contribute to demographic, religious, or cultural continuity. Anjum's motherhood resists this logic of reproductive futurism. Her maternal practice is not oriented toward securing lineage, inheritance, or national continuity but toward sustaining precarious life in the present. This temporal refusal aligns with Sara Ahmed's theorization of queer orientations that deviate from normative trajectories of progress, success, and national happiness. Anjum's motherhood does not advance the nation; it unsettles the terms through which the nation defines value.

Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics further clarifies the political stakes of Anjum's maternal dissent. The Indian nation-state, as depicted in Roy's novel, governs through selective abandonment, rendering certain populations—religious minorities, caste-oppressed communities, and gender-nonconforming bodies—disposable. Anjum's motherhood operates as a counter-necropolitical practice that sustains life precisely where the state withdraws care and recognition. By mothering outside the frameworks of reproductive citizenship, Anjum exposes how nationalist motherhood depends on the exclusion of bodies deemed non-reproductive, non-normative, and politically inconvenient.

Crucially, Roy refuses to redeem Anjum through nationalist incorporation or moral idealization. Anjum is not transformed into a symbolic Mother figure of the nation; instead, her motherhood remains precarious, unsanctioned, and unresolved. This refusal resonates with Adrienne Rich's insistence on distinguishing lived maternal experience from the ideological institution of motherhood that serves state power. By keeping Anjum's maternal identity unstable and vulnerable, Roy resists converting dissent into assimilation.

Ultimately, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* reconceptualizes motherhood as a form of ethical refusal that challenges the nation's investment in reproductive citizenship. Through Anjum, Roy imagines a maternal practice that neither reproduces the nation nor seeks validation from it. Motherhood becomes an act of dissent that interrupts nationalist fantasies of continuity and exposes care as a political force capable of existing beyond the boundaries of citizenship, legitimacy, and state control.

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A RADICAL POLITICS OF MOTHERHOOD

The term hijra, which is how Anjum's identity is described in the novel (alternatively spelled hijda, hijara) refers to a person in South Asia who adopts a gender role that is neither strictly male nor female. Its etymology is rooted in the Arabic term hijra (or hijrah), meaning "departure," "exodus," or "migration," specifically stemming from the root hjr used for leaving one's tribe.

This feeling of departure and migration also permeates into the kind of motherhood Anjum represents. Her motherhood is separated and is a departure from the norm of heteronormative biologically determined motherhood. In this departure lies her and the novel's ultimate truth. Motherhood which is linked with the womb is placed outside Anjum's body; a body which is not whole as per the state's and religious idea. This idea of separating mothering from the female body is what this paper has talked about and also placing the said body with its satellite motherhood in the grand scheme of caregiving.

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