

THE MINISTRY OF UTMOST RESILIENCE: ECO-FEMINISM, ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION, AND MARGINALIZED VOICES IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S *THE MINISTRY OF UTMOST HAPPINESS*

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Abstract

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) presents a vast, intricate tapestry of contemporary India, threading together diverse narratives that encapsulate the socio-political landscape of the nation. This research article delves into the eco-feminist themes present in Roy's novel, focusing on how the environmental degradation wrought by urbanization serves as a backdrop for the marginalization of vulnerable communities, particularly women. Through a close reading of the novel, this study examines the intersections of nature, gender, and society, analyzing how Roy's narrative portrays the symbiotic relationship between environmental health and human well-being. By invoking eco-feminist theory, the article explores how Roy's characters, especially the marginalized, navigate a world of ecological and social collapse, advocating for a reimagined, more inclusive approach to environmental and gender justice. This research underscores the relevance of Roy's novel in the context of contemporary discussions on environmental ethics, urbanization, and the role of women in ecological stewardship.

Keywords: Eco-Feminism, Environmental Degradation, Urbanization, Marginalization, Gender Justice, Ecological Collapse.

INTRODUCTION

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is a novel that defies conventional genre boundaries, weaving together the stories of various characters across the vast socio-political and geographical landscape of India. The novel is as much about the nation itself as it is about its characters, presenting a narrative that oscillates between the deeply personal and the expansively political. This research article seeks to explore the novel through the lens of eco-feminism, an interdisciplinary framework that examines the connections between the exploitation of the environment and the oppression of women. Eco-feminism argues that both forms of exploitation arise from the same patriarchal logic that seeks to dominate and control both nature and women.

At its core, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is a novel about the resilience of the marginalized—those who have been pushed to the edges of society, whether because of their gender, religion, caste, or sexuality. However, it is also a novel deeply concerned with the degradation of the environment and the profound impact this has on the lives of its characters. The novel's urban landscapes are often depicted as sites of ecological

collapse, where unchecked urbanization has led to environmental destruction, and where the most vulnerable are left to bear the brunt of these changes.

This article is structured as follows: First, it will discuss the eco-feminist framework and its relevance to the novel. Following this, it will examine the theme of environmental degradation as depicted in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. The impact of urbanization on the marginalized, particularly women, will be explored in the subsequent section. Finally, the article will conclude with an analysis of the novel's vision for a more inclusive and sustainable future.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Eco-Feminism in *the Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

Eco-feminism, as a theoretical framework, offers a lens through which to view the intersections between environmental degradation and the marginalization of women. According to Vandana Shiva, a prominent eco-feminist scholar, the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women are interconnected, stemming from a worldview that sees both as resources to be controlled and exploited for profit (Shiva, 1989). This framework is particularly relevant to *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, where Roy portrays a world in which the degradation of the environment is inextricably linked to the marginalization of certain communities, including women.

In the novel, Roy draws a parallel between the destruction of the natural world and the violence inflicted upon marginalized groups. The urban landscape is depicted as a space where both nature and people are subject to relentless exploitation. The opening scenes of the novel introduce readers to the character of Anjum, a hijra (transgender woman), who lives in a graveyard in Delhi. The graveyard, once a place of rest and reflection, has been transformed into a chaotic, overcrowded space, emblematic of the city's uncontrolled growth and the accompanying environmental degradation. As Anjum notes, "The trees here, they look like they're weeping. Everything is being torn apart uprooted, displaced, cut down" (Roy, 2017, p. 45).

This imagery of weeping trees and uprooted nature serves as a powerful metaphor for the novel's eco-feminist concerns. Just as the natural world is being destroyed by urbanization, so too are the lives of those who live on the margins, particularly women. The novel's portrayal of the graveyard as both a sanctuary and a site of ecological collapse reflects the dual realities faced by marginalized communities in urban India—on the one hand, they seek refuge in these spaces, but on the other hand, they are the first to suffer the consequences of environmental degradation.

Environmental Degradation in *the Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

Environmental degradation is a central theme in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, with Roy using the urban landscapes of Delhi and Kashmir to explore the destructive impact of human activities on the natural world. Throughout the novel, the environment is depicted as a victim of relentless exploitation, with rivers polluted, forests destroyed, and air thick with smog. Roy's portrayal of Delhi, in particular, is that of a city on the brink of

ecological collapse, where the forces of capitalism and urbanization have left both the environment and its inhabitants in a state of crisis.

The novel's depiction of environmental degradation is closely tied to the experiences of its characters, many of whom are forced to navigate a world that is increasingly hostile to both people and nature. For instance, the character of Saddam Hussain, who becomes one of Anjum's close companions, works as a butcher in Delhi, a city where "the rivers ran black with blood and the air was thick with the stench of death" (Roy, 2017, p. 78). This vivid imagery of pollution and decay underscores the environmental destruction wrought by human activities, particularly in urban areas.

Environmental degradation in the novel is not just a backdrop but a significant force that shapes the lives of the characters. The setting of the graveyard, where Anjum, a transgender woman, finds solace, becomes a symbol of how marginalized communities find themselves in degraded spaces. The graveyard, a place of death and decay, becomes a sanctuary for the living, reflecting the paradox of seeking life amidst destruction. This resonates with the eco-feminist perspective that sees the degradation of nature and the marginalization of vulnerable communities as interconnected phenomena (Merchant, 1995).

Roy also highlights the ways in which environmental degradation disproportionately affects the marginalized. The novel's portrayal of the Yamuna River, once a lifeline for the people of Delhi, now reduced to a polluted, lifeless stream, serves as a powerful symbol of the environmental and social injustices that plague the city. The Yamuna, which Anjum visits regularly, is described as "a dead river, choked with sewage and industrial waste" (Roy, 2017, p. 136). This image of a dying river reflects the broader environmental crisis facing the city and its inhabitants, particularly those who are already marginalized by society.

The novel's treatment of environmental degradation is not limited to urban spaces. Roy also addresses the ecological devastation in Kashmir, a region that has been ravaged by decades of conflict. The novel's portrayal of Kashmir as a "wounded paradise" (Roy, 2017, p. 202) highlights the intersection of environmental destruction and political violence. The forests of Kashmir, once teeming with life, have been decimated by war, with trees felled and wildlife driven to extinction. This destruction of nature is paralleled by the suffering of the people of Kashmir, particularly women, who bear the brunt of both environmental and social violence.

Urbanization and the Marginalization of Communities

The rapid urbanization of India is a recurring theme in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, with Roy critiquing the ways in which the relentless expansion of cities has led to the marginalization of vulnerable communities. Urbanization, as depicted in the novel, is not just a process of physical expansion, but also one of social exclusion, where the poor and marginalized are pushed to the fringes of society.

Anjum's life in the graveyard is a direct result of this process of marginalization. As a hijra, Anjum is already marginalized by society because of her gender identity. However, her

decision to live in the graveyard is also a response to the exclusionary nature of urban spaces, where those who do not conform to societal norms are often relegated to the margins. The graveyard, while a site of environmental degradation, also becomes a space of resistance, where Anjum and others like her create a community that defies the exclusionary logic of the city.

Roy's portrayal of the city as a space of exclusion is further explored through the character of Tilottama, or Tilo, a woman who defies societal expectations in both her personal and professional life. Tilo's relationship with the city is one of ambivalence—while she is drawn to the vibrancy of urban life, she is also acutely aware of its oppressive nature. This is particularly evident in her interactions with the environment, as she witnesses the destruction of Delhi's green spaces in the name of progress. Tilo reflects, "The trees that once lined the streets have been replaced by concrete, the birds silenced by the roar of traffic. This is a city that devours everything in its path, leaving nothing but dust and despair" (Roy, 2017, p. 189).

The novel highlights how urbanization exacerbates social inequalities, displacing marginalized communities and eroding traditional ways of life. This is evident in the story of Anjum, who, after facing societal rejection, creates a new community in the graveyard. Anjum's story is a testament to the resilience of marginalized individuals in the face of urban alienation. Roy's narrative echoes the concerns of urban sociologists who argue that rapid urbanization often leads to the marginalization of vulnerable populations (Harvey, 2012).

Urbanization in the novel is also linked to the exploitation of natural resources, with the city depicted as a voracious entity that consumes the environment and the people who inhabit it. This is evident in the portrayal of the construction industry, which Roy describes as "a machine that chews up the earth and spits out concrete" (Roy, 2017, p. 213). The novel's critique of urbanization is not just an indictment of the environmental destruction it causes, but also a commentary on the social inequalities it exacerbates.

Women, Marginalization, and Eco-Feminism

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, women are often depicted as both the victims and the defenders of the environment. The novel's eco-feminist themes are most evident in the portrayal of women who, despite being marginalized by society, play a crucial role in resisting environmental and social injustices. Roy's female characters are not passive victims, but active agents who challenge the systems of power that seek to oppress them.

Anjum's story is a testament to the resilience of marginalized women in the face of environmental and social degradation. Despite being ostracized because of her gender identity, Anjum refuses to accept her marginalization. By transforming the graveyard into a space of community and resistance, Anjum asserts her right to exist in a world that seeks to exclude her. Her connection to the environment is not just a matter of survival, but also a form of defiance against the forces of urbanization and exploitation.

The novel's exploration of gender and marginalization aligns with eco-feminist theories that highlight the parallels between the exploitation of women and nature. Eco-feminists

argue that patriarchal structures devalue both women and the environment, leading to their mutual exploitation (Warren, 2000). Anjum's transformation of the graveyard into a sanctuary for outcasts symbolizes resistance against these oppressive structures, creating a space where marginalized individuals can reclaim their agency.

Similarly, Tilo's relationship with the environment reflects her resistance to the patriarchal structures that seek to control her. Throughout the novel, Tilo's connection to nature is portrayed as a source of strength and empowerment. Her decision to live a life that defies societal expectations is closely linked to her refusal to accept the destruction of the natural world. In this sense, Tilo embodies the eco-feminist ideal of women as stewards of the environment, challenging the systems of power that threaten both nature and humanity.

The novel also explores the intersection of environmental and gender justice through the character of Miss Jebeen, the baby girl adopted by Anjum. Miss Jebeen's life is shaped by the forces of environmental and social violence, as she is born into a world that is increasingly hostile to both nature and women. However, her story is also one of hope and resilience, as she becomes a symbol of the possibility of a more just and sustainable future. Through Miss Jebeen, Roy suggests that the future of both women and the environment is intertwined, and that the fight for gender justice must also include a fight for environmental justice.

Eco-Feminism and *the Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

Eco-feminism provides a useful framework for analyzing the interconnected themes of environmental degradation, urbanization, and marginalization in Roy's novel. Eco-feminism, as defined by scholars such as Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies, emphasizes the link between the oppression of women and the degradation of the environment. It critiques the dominant patriarchal and capitalist systems that exploit both natural resources and marginalized communities (Shiva & Mies, 2014).

The Intersection of Environmental and Social Justice

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Roy illustrates how environmental and social justice issues intersect. The graveyard, a central symbol in the novel, represents this intersection. It is both a site of environmental degradation and a sanctuary for marginalized individuals. This duality reflects the eco-feminist idea that environmental justice is inseparable from social justice (Gaard, 1993). The characters' struggles for survival and dignity in a degraded environment highlight the need for holistic approaches to justice that address both ecological and social dimensions.

Resistance and Resilience

The novel also showcases acts of resistance and resilience by marginalized communities. Anjum's creation of a communal living space in the graveyard is an act of defiance against the societal structures that exclude her. Similarly, Tilo's involvement in political activism reflects her resistance to the oppressive forces in her life. These acts of resistance are central to eco-feminist praxis, which advocates for grassroots movements and community-based solutions to environmental and social issues (King, 1989).

Feminist Ethics of Care

Roy's portrayal of her characters' relationships with each other and their environment embodies the feminist ethics of care, a key concept in eco-feminism. The ethics of care emphasizes empathy, interconnectedness, and the importance of nurturing relationships (Noddings, 1984). In the novel, Anjum's care for the graveyard and its inhabitants, as well as Tilo's commitment to her friends and causes, illustrate this ethical framework. Their actions demonstrate how care and compassion can challenge oppressive systems and create spaces of healing and solidarity.

The Relevance of Roy's Narratives Today

In today's world, where environmental degradation and social inequalities are increasingly interconnected, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* offers a powerful critique of the systems of power that perpetuate both. Roy's novel is not just a reflection on the past and present, but also a call to action for the future. By highlighting the resilience of marginalized communities, particularly women, in the face of environmental and social collapse, Roy offers a vision of a world where both nature and humanity can thrive.

The relevance of Roy's eco-feminist themes is underscored by the current global environmental crisis. As the world grapples with the impacts of climate change, deforestation, and pollution, the voices of those most affected by these changes—often women and marginalized communities — are often overlooked. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* serves as a reminder of the importance of amplifying these voices and recognizing the crucial role that women play in environmental stewardship.

Furthermore, the novel's critique of urbanization is particularly pertinent in the context of India's rapid urban growth. As cities expand, the pressures on the environment and marginalized communities continue to mount. Roy's portrayal of Delhi as a city on the brink of ecological collapse is a stark warning of the consequences of unchecked urbanization, and a call for more sustainable and inclusive approaches to urban development.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is a novel that defies easy categorization, blending elements of political critique, social commentary, and environmental reflection. Through its portrayal of environmental degradation, urbanization, and the marginalization of women, the novel offers a powerful exploration of the intersections between nature, gender, and society. By invoking eco-feminist theory, this research article has sought to illuminate the ways in which Roy's narrative challenges the systems of power that perpetuate both environmental and social injustices.

The novel is a profound exploration of environmental degradation, urbanization, and the marginalization of various communities. Through its richly drawn characters and evocative settings, the novel offers a poignant critique of contemporary societal issues. By situating these themes within the framework of eco-feminism, this paper has highlighted the interconnectedness of environmental and social justice concerns in Roy's

narrative. The novel's portrayal of resistance, resilience, and care provides valuable insights for eco-feminist discourse, emphasizing the need for holistic approaches to addressing the intertwined challenges of environmental degradation and social inequality. The novel's eco-feminist themes are particularly relevant in the context of contemporary global challenges, where the fight for environmental justice is increasingly intertwined with the fight for gender equality. Roy's portrayal of the resilience of marginalized women in the face of environmental and social collapse offers a vision of hope and possibility, suggesting that the future of both humanity and the environment is inextricably linked.

In conclusion, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is a novel that not only reflects the complexities of the world we live in but also offers a blueprint for a more just and sustainable future. By amplifying the voices of those most affected by environmental and social injustices, Roy's novel challenges us to rethink our relationship with nature and each other, and to imagine a world where both can thrive.

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