

Minimal Lives of a Republic in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

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Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) places lives conventionally relegated to the margins of the nation at the centre of its fictional world. Moving across Delhi, Kashmir, Gujarat, Kerala and central India, the novel brings together transgender identities, religious minorities, Dalits, political dissenters, displaced people, abandoned children and individuals affected by different forms of social and political vulnerability. This paper examines these figures as the "minimal lives" of the republic: not lives that are inherently insignificant, but lives whose claims to recognition, security, citizenship and belonging are repeatedly diminished by social hierarchies and structures of power. Drawing principally on Giorgio Agamben's concepts of sovereign power and "bare life," while engaging with postcolonial and subaltern approaches to representation, the study investigates how Roy converts marginal existence into a central category for rethinking the contemporary nation. It argues that the novel's fragmented structure, multiple narrative voices, documentary elements, shifting geographical locations and interweaving of private memory with public history constitute more than formal experimentation. They create a counter-archive through which neglected experiences enter the narrative of the republic. Characters such as Anjum, Tilo, Musa, Saddam Hussain, Comrade Revathy and Dr Azad Bhartiya reveal different and non-equivalent forms of exclusion, while their convergence prevents marginality from being understood as a single homogeneous condition. The paper further argues that Roy moves beyond the absolute implications of "bare life" by representing marginal subjects as capable of memory, resistance, care, humour, testimony and the creation of alternative communities. The Jannat Guest House consequently emerges as a crucial counter-space in which abandonment is provisionally transformed into belonging. Through these narrative strategies, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* interrogates the distance between

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of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>). the democratic promise of citizenship and the uneven realities through which citizenship is lived. Roy's novel ultimately transforms minimal lives from objects of political and social power into subjects of memory, narration and historical presence.

Keywords: Arundhati Roy; *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*; minimal lives; marginality; bare life; sovereignty; postcolonial nation; citizenship; counter-archive; belonging

I. Introduction and Research Context: Representing the Minimal Lives of the Republic

The history of Indian English fiction is inseparable from the question of representation: who can speak for India, whose experiences become representative of the nation, and which lives remain outside the narratives through which the nation understands itself. From the social realism of Mulk Raj Anand to the postcolonial experimentation of Salman Rushdie and the politically engaged fiction of Arundhati Roy, Indian Anglophone writing has repeatedly returned to the relationship between individual experience and collective history. Yet the terms of this relationship have changed considerably. If the early social novel sought to expose structures of caste and poverty through identifiable victims of social injustice, later postcolonial fiction frequently approached the nation through memory, hybridity, linguistic play, fractured histories and formally self-conscious narration. Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* inherits elements of both traditions while refusing to remain fully within either. Its concern with marginalised existence recalls the ethical urgency of social realism, whereas its fragmented structure and unstable narrative perspectives draw upon the formal possibilities opened by postcolonial fiction. What distinguishes the novel is the manner in which these two impulses are brought together to reconsider the Indian republic from the position of those who remain only partially accommodated within its narratives of citizenship and belonging.

The representation of marginality in Indian English fiction has a long genealogy. Mulk

Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935), centred on a single day in the life of Bakha, placed caste oppression at the heart of the modern Indian novel in English. The political significance of Anand's fiction lay partly in making a socially stigmatised individual visible as a complex human subject. Later decades witnessed a considerable expansion in the thematic and formal range of Indian English writing. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), in particular, altered the relationship between private biography and national history by making the body and memory of Saleem Sinai inseparable from the history of independent India. Rushdie's linguistic inventiveness, non-linear chronology, unreliable memory and blending of the historical with the fantastic established an influential model for narrating the postcolonial nation.

Roy's fiction belongs to this history but also unsettles it. *The God of Small Things* (1997) had already demonstrated her concern with those whom social systems classify, discipline or silence. Caste, gender, sexuality, family, religion and political ideology intersect in that novel through the intimate histories of individuals whose desires conflict with socially enforced boundaries. When Roy returned to the novel form two decades later with *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, the scale of her fictional world had expanded substantially. The second novel moves across regions, historical moments, political conflicts and social locations. Its narrative travels from Old Delhi and its hijra community to Kashmir, Gujarat, Kerala and central India; from graveyards and pavements to government offices, protest sites, domestic interiors and militarised landscapes. The official publisher itself describes the narrative as sweeping "across the years and a

teeming continent,” and the novel was published in 2017, twenty years after *The God of Small Things*.

This enlarged geography is accompanied by an enlarged field of marginality. Anjum, born Aftab, inhabits a gender identity that unsettles the binary expectations of family and society. Saddam Hussain carries the memory of caste violence and reconstructs his identity through an adopted name. Musa’s life becomes inseparable from the conflict in Kashmir. Tilo moves between social worlds without becoming fully at home in any of them. Dr Azad Bhartiya converts his body into a continuing statement of protest. Comrade Revathy’s testimony brings another region, political struggle and form of gendered vulnerability into the narrative. Miss Udaya Jebeen, abandoned as an infant and subsequently incorporated into an unconventional community, becomes associated with the possibility of a future that cannot be contained by ordinary genealogies. These characters cannot be placed under a single sociological label. Their marginalities arise from different histories and structures. What connects them is not identical suffering but an unstable relationship with established forms of social recognition.

This paper uses the term **“minimal lives”** to describe that condition. “Minimal” does not refer to the intrinsic worth, emotional richness or moral significance of these lives. On the contrary, Roy’s narrative continually demonstrates their complexity. The term identifies a political and representational process through which certain people are made to occupy diminished positions within the social imagination of the republic. Their access to protection, recognition, dignity, public visibility or secure belonging may become conditional, fragile or incomplete. A minimal life is therefore a life that power attempts to reduce, categorise, displace or render peripheral, even while that life continues to generate memory, affection, resistance and alternative forms of community.

The distinction is important because marginality by itself can become too general a critical category. It may gather radically different experiences into a single vocabulary of exclusion.

Roy’s novel resists such simplification. Anjum’s gendered and religious location cannot simply be equated with Saddam’s experience of caste, just as neither is identical to Musa’s relationship with Kashmir or Revathy’s political and gendered history. The novel brings these characters into proximity without erasing the historical differences among them. The concept of minimal lives therefore allows this study to examine what their experiences share while remaining attentive to the different processes through which lives are socially and politically minimised.

Existing scholarship on *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* demonstrates the critical richness of Roy’s second novel. Critics have approached it through realism, trauma, precarity, gender, happiness, spatiality, politics and narrative form. Filippo Menozzi, for example, argues that the novel complicates any straightforward opposition between fiction and Roy’s political non-fiction. Rather than treating realism as transparent representation, he reads the novel’s combination of fictional and non-fictional modes as a contradictory and digressive aesthetic concerned with the difficulty of representing suffering. Research on trauma has similarly drawn attention to the graveyard, repeated images of loss, psychic suffering, storytelling and the movement from traumatic experience towards forms of social reconnection.

Other scholarship has emphasised precarity and the alternative communities produced within damaged spaces. Critical work on the novel’s “ruin-worlds,” for instance, reads Delhi and Kashmir as spaces where precarity coexists with emergent solidarities and where relationships are created across boundaries separating life and death, abandonment and community. Studies of happiness have meanwhile reconsidered Jannat not simply as an ironic response to the novel’s title but as a space in which individuals divided by gender, caste, class and religion attempt to produce alternative forms of coexistence. More recent work has described Roy’s fragmented narrative and documentary strategies in terms of literary

witnessing and the creation of a counter-archive opposed to dominant historical narratives.

These approaches establish important contexts for the present study, but they also make it necessary to define its particular intervention. The argument advanced here is not simply that Roy represents marginalised characters, nor merely that her fragmented narrative challenges dominant history. Rather, the paper asks what happens when a republic is imaginatively reconstructed through lives whose political and social recognition has been reduced to a minimum. This shifts attention from marginality as a thematic subject to minimalisation as a relationship between life, power and representation. The characters matter not only because they are excluded but because the novel asks what kinds of political community become imaginable when those who have been excluded acquire narrative centrality.

Giorgio Agamben's theory of sovereign power and "bare life" provides a productive conceptual vocabulary for addressing this question. In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Agamben examines the paradoxical relationship between political order and lives that can be included through their very exclusion. His distinction between *zōē*, biological existence, and *bios*, life recognised within a political form, offers a way of considering how political communities define the boundaries of legitimate belonging. The figure of *homo sacer* represents the extreme condition in which life remains exposed to sovereign power while occupying an unstable position in relation to juridical protection.

Agamben's framework is useful for Roy's novel because many of her characters experience belonging as uncertain rather than secure. They are not necessarily located wholly outside the state or society; instead, they inhabit contradictory positions in which they are simultaneously present and marginalised. Anjum belongs to Delhi yet repeatedly encounters the social regulation of gender and religious identity. Saddam lives within the republic while carrying the consequences of caste hierarchy. Musa's relationship with territory, political authority and

violence makes citizenship a deeply contested category. Revathy's testimony reveals how the body can become vulnerable at the intersection of gender, political conflict and institutional power. Their lives demonstrate different forms of what may be called precarious citizenship.

At the same time, this study does not apply Agamben mechanically. Roy's characters exceed the condition of "bare life." They speak, remember, desire, mourn, joke, resist, nurture children, establish relationships and create communities. If sovereign power tends towards the reduction of persons to manageable or disposable categories, Roy's narrative performs the opposite movement. It restores biography to bodies, names to categories and memories to those who might otherwise appear only as statistics, victims or political abstractions. The movement from *zōē* towards *bios* therefore becomes not simply a matter of legal incorporation but also a narrative act. To tell a life in its contradictions is already to resist its reduction.

This is where the form of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* becomes crucial. The novel refuses a single protagonist, stable chronology or authoritative narrative centre. It proceeds through shifts in voice, letters, notebooks, testimonies, documents, political commentary, intimate memories and apparently digressive episodes. Such fragmentation has sometimes been understood as an expression of the fractured political and psychological realities represented by the text. Scholarship has also linked Roy's form to the problem of realism and the difficulty of representing suffering without reducing it to a transparent political message. The present study extends these insights by arguing that fragmentation allows the novel to construct a republic without a single representative citizen. No one character is required to stand for India. Instead, the nation becomes visible through the relations among multiple incomplete histories.

Roy's well-known formulation near the end of the novel—"How to tell a shattered story?"—provides an important clue to this aesthetic. The question concerns more than

narrative technique. A shattered story requires a form capable of acknowledging discontinuity without converting difference into artificial unity. The novel consequently moves between characters and regions in ways that initially appear disjointed but gradually reveal patterns of vulnerability, memory and connection. The absence of conventional narrative unity becomes an ethical refusal to impose a single explanatory structure upon heterogeneous lives.

The novel's geographical organisation performs a similar function. Delhi, Kashmir, Gujarat, Kerala and central India do not appear merely as settings. Each carries distinct historical and cultural associations, and the movement between them prevents the republic from being imagined exclusively from its political centre. Delhi itself is internally divided into monumental and marginal spaces. Jantar Mantar, the graveyard, the streets of Old Delhi and Jannat Guest House offer alternative maps of the capital. Public monuments and official institutions coexist with pavements, graves and improvised shelters. The geography of the republic is therefore reorganised from below.

The graveyard is perhaps the most significant example of this spatial inversion. Anjum's movement into the graveyard appears initially to confirm her exclusion from ordinary social life. Yet the space gradually becomes Jannat Guest House, a place capable of receiving people for whom conventional structures of family, caste, gender or citizenship have proved inadequate. Death and life become spatially intertwined. A location associated with endings becomes the beginning of an alternative social arrangement. The transformation is not utopian: Jannat cannot abolish the structures that have produced its inhabitants' vulnerability. Nevertheless, it demonstrates their capacity to create forms of belonging within the ruins of exclusion.

The idea of a counter-archive is particularly useful here. Official archives typically depend upon selection, classification and institutional authority. Roy's fictional archive works differently. It preserves letters, names,

bodies, memories, testimonies, jokes, slogans, photographs, private grief and apparently minor incidents. The narrative repeatedly attends to what conventional history might consider peripheral. Recent scholarship has likewise recognised the novel's fragmented and documentary form as a mode of counter-archival literary witnessing. In the present argument, however, the counter-archive is specifically connected to minimal life: it is the mechanism by which lives diminished in public representation acquire historical density.

Memory becomes indispensable to this process. Public history tends to organise events through dates, institutions, leaders and political outcomes. Personal memory preserves another scale of history: fear, loss, bodily vulnerability, love, embarrassment, silence and the persistence of images that refuse to disappear. Roy repeatedly brings these scales together. Historical events enter the narrative through their consequences for particular people, while private experiences acquire political significance because they reveal how large structures are lived at the level of the body and household. The boundary between personal and political history consequently becomes unstable.

This relationship also distinguishes Roy's engagement with postcolonial history from a purely documentary project. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is not a substitute for historiography, nor should its fictional representations be treated as neutral historical accounts. Roy writes from a recognisable critical and political position, and her novel frequently uses satire, irony, polemic and emotional intensity. Its value lies precisely in the different kind of knowledge fiction can produce. The novel asks what public events feel like when experienced by individuals whose lives rarely determine the terms in which those events are officially narrated.

Such a distinction is particularly necessary when reading the novel's representations of contested political histories. Kashmir, communal violence, caste oppression and political protest carry complex histories and competing interpretations. Literary criticism

should therefore avoid turning the novel's political perspective automatically into historical fact. The concern of the present paper is not to adjudicate those conflicts but to examine how Roy's fiction represents their effects upon particular characters and how those representations contribute to the novel's larger critique of belonging, sovereignty and citizenship. This preserves the difference between analysing a political novel and reproducing its politics as unqualified historical description.

The term "republic" in the title of this paper is consequently used in both institutional and imaginative senses. Institutionally, it refers to a political community structured through constitutional citizenship and democratic ideals. Imaginatively, it refers to the narratives through which citizens recognise themselves and others as belonging to a shared political world. Roy's novel is especially concerned with the gap between these two dimensions. Formal citizenship does not automatically guarantee social recognition, just as exclusion from dominant cultural narratives does not necessarily imply legal exclusion. Minimal lives emerge within this gap.

The question is therefore not simply whether marginalised people belong to the republic, but how much of their life the republic is prepared to recognise. A person may possess citizenship while aspects of gender, caste, religion, political conviction or regional identity expose that person to forms of social vulnerability. Conversely, those who appear socially marginal may construct powerful alternative forms of belonging. Roy's novel repeatedly stages this contradiction. Its characters occupy the republic without being fully contained by the identities the republic makes available to them.

This paper accordingly develops its argument through several interconnected stages. The following section examines the narrative imperatives through which Roy converts postcolonial history into fragmented personal experience. It considers how the novel's discontinuous form resists the expectation of a unified national story. The discussion then turns

to the inversion of the narrative lens, showing how Roy replaces perspectives from the political centre with views produced from graveyards, streets, contested territories and socially marginal spaces. The subsequent analysis charts the different voices through which gender, caste, religion, political dissent and territorial conflict enter the narrative without becoming interchangeable forms of marginality.

The paper then develops its principal theoretical argument through Agamben's concept of bare life, while modifying that concept through the idea of precarious citizenship. This section examines how the novel represents exposure to power but also how its characters exceed political reduction through agency, memory and relationships. The analysis subsequently turns to Roy's authorial observation and the narrative "(re)turn" through which private memory becomes a counter-archive of the republic. Finally, the conclusion brings these strands together to argue that Jannat Guest House embodies the novel's most significant transformation: minimal lives do not simply survive exclusion but create an alternative, if fragile, practice of belonging.

Seen in this way, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is not merely a novel about the margins of contemporary India. It is a novel that **relocates the imaginative centre of the republic**. Its most significant political and aesthetic gesture lies in refusing to treat socially vulnerable people as supplementary to the national story. The transgender citizen, the Dalit, the dissenter, the displaced person, the Kashmiri, the abandoned child and the socially estranged individual become bearers of historical knowledge. Their lives reveal aspects of the republic that cannot be perceived from its institutional centres alone.

The phrase "minimal lives of a republic" therefore names the central paradox explored throughout this study. These are lives made minimal by unequal structures of recognition but rendered expansive by narrative. Roy does not simply make the invisible visible; she challenges the scale by which visibility itself is determined.

The apparently peripheral becomes historically consequential, the graveyard becomes a home, the abandoned child becomes a figure of futurity, and fragmented memories become an alternative archive. In this inversion, the novel asks readers to imagine the republic from the position of those whose presence exposes the incompleteness of its promises.

The literary importance of Roy's project lies ultimately in this movement from reduction to narration. Structures of power may classify people according to gender, caste, religion, territory or political identity, but the novel continually restores what such classifications cannot contain. A minimal life becomes a remembered life; a vulnerable body becomes a speaking subject; an excluded person becomes part of an improvised community. The republic is consequently re-read not through the certainty of its official self-image but through the unsettled histories of those who inhabit its borders—social, cultural, political and geographical. It is through these lives that Roy constructs one of the central questions of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*: whether democracy can be understood adequately without attending to those whom its dominant narratives have learned not to see.

II. Narrative Imperatives Of Postcolonial History

The unusual structure of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is closely related to the kind of history Arundhati Roy attempts to narrate. The novel does not proceed through a continuous chronology, a stable narrator, or the development of a single protagonist. It moves abruptly between people, places and historical moments, allowing stories that initially appear unrelated to acquire significance through their gradual convergence. Such discontinuity is not merely a postmodern experiment with form. It reflects a fundamental difficulty at the centre of the novel: a nation composed of conflicting memories and unequal experiences cannot easily be represented through a single, coherent narrative. Roy therefore makes fragmentation an essential condition of historical representation.

Postcolonial fiction has frequently questioned the assumption that national history can be narrated as a smooth progression from colonialism to independence and democratic modernity. The achievement of political independence may provide an important chronological division, but it cannot by itself explain the uneven experiences of individuals and communities within the postcolonial state. Histories of caste, gender, religious difference, regional conflict and social displacement cross the convenient boundaries established by political chronology. Roy's novel draws attention to these continuities by placing contemporary experiences beside older memories of social division and political violence. History consequently appears not as a completed past but as something carried into the present through bodies, relationships and memories.

This approach distinguishes Roy's historical imagination from a conventional historical novel. She does not reconstruct one period in detail or organise fictional characters around a single documented event. Instead, historical references appear throughout the narrative as pressures upon individual lives. Public events acquire meaning because somebody remembers them, suffers their consequences, changes a name, loses a relationship, leaves a home, joins a protest, or searches for another place in which to belong. The historical and the intimate continually enter each other's territory.

In this respect, Roy extends an important tendency within Indian Anglophone fiction. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* famously connected Saleem Sinai's personal history with the history of independent India, making memory both a narrative resource and a source of uncertainty. Roy similarly refuses the idea that history can be recovered through an entirely objective narrative voice. Yet *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* differs significantly in its distribution of historical consciousness. There is no Saleem-like figure through whom the nation can be imaginatively assembled. Historical experience is dispersed among Anjum, Tilo,

Musa, Saddam Hussain, Dr Azad Bhartiya, Comrade Revathy and numerous minor characters. No single consciousness possesses the republic.

This dispersal is particularly important to the paper's concept of **minimal lives**. A narrative centred upon one representative protagonist might reproduce the very hierarchy that Roy's novel seeks to question. Instead, the text repeatedly transfers attention from one apparently peripheral life to another. A character who initially seems secondary may become the centre of an extended narrative sequence, while an established protagonist may disappear for considerable stretches of the novel. Narrative importance is therefore unstable. Roy denies the reader the comfort of knowing in advance whose life matters most.

Anjum's story provides the first major instance of this strategy. Her early life as Aftab, her movement towards the Khwabgah, her experiences of gender and community, and her later withdrawal into the graveyard might initially suggest that the novel will remain primarily her story. Instead, the narrative eventually moves away from her and enters an apparently different fictional world involving Tilo, Musa, Naga and Biplab Dasgupta. The transition can appear abrupt because the connections between these worlds are not immediately explained. Roy requires the reader to inhabit discontinuity before discovering relationship.

The structural break has an important consequence. It prevents Anjum from becoming the single emblem of marginality. Had the novel remained entirely within her perspective, the condition of exclusion might have been identified principally with gender and religious identity. The movement towards Kashmir and Tilo introduces different forms of political vulnerability and displacement. Later, Saddam and Revathy add caste and revolutionary politics to this field. The narrative consequently expands not by claiming that all these experiences are identical, but by placing them within a shared question: what happens to people whose lives do not fit

comfortably within established structures of recognition?

Geography reinforces this method. Delhi is crucial to the novel, but it cannot contain its understanding of India. The narrative travels towards Kashmir, Gujarat, Kerala and central India, producing a map constructed from journeys, memories and displacements rather than administrative boundaries. Each location introduces a different history, yet those histories eventually intersect. A person may leave one place while continuing to carry its memories elsewhere. Geography thus becomes mobile: places survive inside characters even after characters have moved away from them.

Anjum's experience after the violence she witnesses in Gujarat illustrates the persistence of place within memory. The significance of the episode lies not simply in Roy's reference to a recognisable historical context but in the psychological afterlife of what Anjum has seen and endured. She returns physically, yet return does not restore an earlier sense of self. The past travels with her. History becomes inseparable from traumatic remembrance, demonstrating why chronological progression cannot adequately represent experience. The calendar moves forward while memory repeatedly moves backwards.

A similar disruption of chronology shapes the Kashmir sections. Musa's life is narrated through personal relationships, bereavement, political commitment and repeated disappearance rather than through a comprehensive chronological history of the Kashmir conflict. Tilo's relationship with him gives political history an intimate dimension, while Biplab's perspective introduces another language of institutional and political understanding. These perspectives do not settle the historical questions surrounding Kashmir. Their narrative function is instead to demonstrate that the same political landscape is perceived differently depending upon the observer's position within it.

Roy's multiplication of viewpoints therefore prevents history from becoming a single authorised account. Tilo cannot entirely explain Musa; Biplab cannot entirely explain Tilo; official language cannot fully contain private grief; and personal memory cannot claim the comprehensiveness of formal history. The novel keeps these modes of understanding in tension. Knowledge remains partial, and that partiality becomes an important ethical feature of the narrative.

The documentary materials scattered through the novel intensify this effect. Letters, notes, slogans, lists, testimonies and bureaucratic forms interrupt conventional narration. They appear to promise factual immediacy, yet their placement within fiction complicates any simple distinction between documentary truth and imaginative construction. These fragments resemble materials that might survive in an archive, but Roy relocates them within a narrative where emotional memory and political interpretation are equally significant.

The archive produced by the novel is therefore deliberately irregular. Conventional historical archives tend to preserve what institutions consider recordable: official correspondence, legal documents, administrative decisions and recognised public events. Roy's fictional archive includes such forms only to place them beside less official materials—the remembered voice, the private notebook, the protester's statement, the abandoned child, the renamed person and the unmarked or insufficiently remembered dead. What would ordinarily remain outside institutional documentation becomes narratively consequential.

Comrade Revathy's story is particularly important in this respect. Her testimony enters the novel from a social and geographical world distinct from Anjum's Delhi and Musa's Kashmir. The narrative does not assimilate her experience into the voice of an omniscient narrator. Testimony preserves the sense that a particular person is attempting to leave behind an account of a life that might otherwise disappear. Her

daughter, Udaya Jebeen, subsequently becomes a living connection between that history and the community formed at Jannat.

The movement from testimony to child demonstrates how Roy links history with futurity. Historical violence leaves consequences, but those consequences are not represented exclusively through death or mourning. Udaya Jebeen enters a network of care that could not have been predicted by conventional kinship. Her arrival helps draw previously separate narrative strands together. What begins as fragmentation therefore develops into an unconventional pattern of relation.

This movement is most visible at Jannat Guest House. Structurally, Jannat performs a function similar to its thematic role: it receives dispersed lives. Anjum, Saddam, Udaya Jebeen and others gather in a place that was originally a graveyard, converting a space of separation between the living and the dead into a site of improvised community. The narrative strands do not resolve into complete harmony, but they begin to coexist. Roy's method is therefore not fragmentation for its own sake. The novel moves from separation towards proximity without demanding sameness.

Dr Azad Bhartiya adds another dimension to this narrative geography. His presence at Jantar Mantar connects bodily existence with public protest. The body itself becomes a political text through fasting and endurance. At the same time, Roy's treatment of him contains humour and exaggeration, preventing the protester from becoming a solemn political symbol. His peculiarities matter. Like the novel's other marginal characters, he exceeds the category through which he might initially be interpreted.

Such characterisation is central to Roy's resistance to abstraction. Political discourse frequently speaks through collective categories—minority, refugee, protester, insurgent, transgender person, Dalit, victim. These categories may be necessary for describing structural conditions, but they can also erase

individual particularity. Fiction can reverse this movement by returning names, memories, contradictions and relationships to people whom political language may reduce to categories. Roy's narrative repeatedly performs this restoration.

Here the relationship with Agamben's notion of bare life becomes visible even before the concept is examined fully in a later section. The exercise of sovereign and social power often depends upon classification: determining who belongs, who is protected, who is suspected, whose identity is recognised, and whose suffering becomes publicly intelligible. Roy's fragmented narrative resists such classificatory certainty. Her characters cross boundaries between identities and spaces. They change names, inhabit unconventional households, move between political categories and establish relationships that exceed inherited structures of belonging.

The novel's fragmentation therefore has a political as well as aesthetic function. A unified national narrative tends to depend upon selection. Some events become foundational, some citizens become representative, and some memories acquire greater public authority than others. Roy disrupts this hierarchy by allowing what appears minor to interrupt what appears major. A graveyard can become as significant as a government institution; a private letter can interrupt geopolitical discussion; an individual's grief can redirect the meaning of a historical event.

This inversion explains why the novel's apparently excessive details are important. Roy frequently pauses over names, bodily features, animals, objects, jokes, conversations and small rituals of everyday life. Such details slow the movement of historical narrative. They refuse to allow public events to swallow the people who experience them. The "small" becomes a method of resisting historical abstraction.

The narrative's humour performs a related function. Even in a novel deeply concerned with violence, loss and exclusion, comic moments repeatedly appear. Humour protects marginal characters from being

represented exclusively through suffering. Anjum is not reducible to victimhood; Saddam is not reducible to caste injury; Azad is not reducible to protest; Tilo is not reducible to political estrangement. Their eccentricities, affections and contradictions insist upon an excess of life beyond the categories imposed upon them.

For this reason, Roy's postcolonial history is best understood as an unfinished history. The past has not disappeared, and the present has not resolved its contradictions. Nor does the novel provide a final ideological synthesis. Jannat offers shelter but does not transform the political structures outside its walls. Musa's history cannot be neatly concluded. Tilo's relationship with belonging remains complicated. The lives gathered by the novel continue rather than arriving at conventional resolution.

This unfinished quality is consistent with the novel's refusal of a triumphant national narrative. Political independence, democratic institutions and constitutional citizenship form important parts of India's history, but Roy's fiction concentrates on the distance between institutional ideals and uneven lived experience. From the perspective of minimal lives, the history of the republic appears less as a completed achievement than as a continuing negotiation over recognition and belonging.

The narrative imperative of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* can therefore be described as the need to tell history without pretending that history has one voice. Fragmentation, geographical movement, documentary interruption and polyphony are all responses to this problem. Roy's formal choices allow incompatible memories to remain visible beside one another and enable lives from different margins to enter a common fictional space without being collapsed into a single identity.

The result is a form of counter-history grounded in narrative plurality. It does not replace official history with another totalising account; instead, it reveals what any total account is likely to leave behind. Through Anjum's memories, Musa's disappearances, Tilo's

notebooks, Revathy's testimony, Saddam's reconstructed identity, Azad's protesting body and Udaya Jebeen's unexpected incorporation into Jannat, the novel gathers fragments that challenge the scale by which historical importance is ordinarily measured.

Roy's postcolonial narrative consequently turns fragmentation into a mode of historical attention. The shattered form of the novel corresponds not only to a fractured political world but also to the ethical demand to recognise lives that cannot be represented adequately by a single national story. The republic becomes legible through fragments because its citizens do not encounter it in identical ways. Some experience it through security, others through uncertainty; some through institutional belonging, others through improvised forms of survival.

Thus, the narrative imperatives of postcolonial history in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* arise from the impossibility of separating national history from the uneven lives through which it is experienced. Roy refuses to repair those differences artificially. Instead, she allows scattered stories to approach one another gradually until their proximity produces a different image of the republic. What emerges is not unity but relation: a narrative community formed from memories, bodies, testimonies and places that conventional histories might leave at the edges.

This method prepares the way for the novel's most decisive representational inversion. Once history is no longer narrated from a single centre, the question becomes one of perspective: from where should the republic be seen? Roy's answer is to lower the narrative gaze towards the graveyard, the pavement, the protest site, the socially excluded body and the contested landscape. The following section therefore examines how *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* reverses the conventional narrative lens and makes the margins not simply objects of representation, but positions from which the nation itself is observed.

iii. The Narrative Lens And Its Inversion In *The Ministry*

If the fragmented structure of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* unsettles the possibility of a unified national history, its narrative perspective produces an equally important change in the position from which that history is viewed. Arundhati Roy repeatedly shifts attention away from institutions, political centres and socially dominant subjects towards individuals and spaces conventionally located at the edges of public visibility. The republic is consequently not observed primarily from parliament, government offices, monuments or official archives. It is encountered through a hijra household, a graveyard, a protest pavement, the memory of caste humiliation, an abandoned child and the troubled landscapes of Kashmir. This reversal of perspective may be understood as an inversion of the conventional narrative lens: those who are commonly observed, classified or spoken about become positions from which society itself is observed.

Such an inversion is fundamental to Roy's representation of the minimal lives of the republic. Social marginality usually implies distance from a recognised centre. Once the narrative perspective moves towards the margin, however, the distinction between centre and periphery becomes unstable. The marginal character no longer appears merely as an object requiring sympathy or explanation. Instead, the structures that have produced marginality become available for scrutiny. The question consequently changes from "What is wrong with the marginal subject?" to "What does the treatment of this subject reveal about the social order that defines the margin?"

Anjum provides the novel's most immediate example of this reversal. Born Aftab into a Muslim family in Old Delhi, she encounters from childhood a social language organised around gender binaries that cannot adequately accommodate her embodied identity. Her movement to the Khwabgah is therefore more than a personal relocation. It introduces the reader to a social space whose inhabitants are

generally perceived from outside through curiosity, stereotype or prejudice. Roy reverses that gaze by entering the everyday life of the community.

The Khwabgah is not represented merely as a refuge populated by victims. It has its own relationships, hierarchies, conflicts, rituals, humour and forms of belonging. By allowing these internal complexities to become narratively visible, Roy challenges the reduction of transgender and hijra identities to a single social category. The inhabitants are neither romanticised nor represented exclusively through suffering. Their ordinary disagreements and attachments are important precisely because ordinary life is itself a form of narrative recognition. People who may appear exceptional from the viewpoint of dominant society become complex and familiar when the narrative gaze is relocated to their world.

Language plays an important role in this inversion. Naming and classification repeatedly reveal the limits of conventional categories. Aftab's emergence as Anjum involves not only a transformation of personal identity but also a struggle over the language through which identity can be recognised. Roy's attention to names, pronouns, kinship and self-description exposes the assumption that official or socially accepted terminology can completely define a person. Anjum's life continually exceeds the categories imposed upon it.

Her later movement from the Khwabgah to the graveyard deepens this spatial and narrative reversal. A cemetery ordinarily marks a boundary between the living community and those who have departed from it. For Anjum, however, the graveyard gradually becomes a place in which another form of life is possible. Her residence among graves initially appears to confirm the extremity of her alienation. Yet the transformation of this space into Jannat Guest House changes its meaning. The graveyard becomes simultaneously a dwelling, guest house, meeting place and unconventional community.

The symbolic importance of this transformation lies in the reversal of social geography. A space associated with death becomes capable of sustaining life, while people who have experienced exclusion create forms of hospitality. The movement is not from the margin back to the recognised centre. Jannat remains geographically and symbolically marginal. What changes is the assumption that meaningful community must originate from established social institutions. Roy imagines belonging from the graveyard outward.

The word "Jannat," suggesting paradise, contributes an element of irony as well as hope. The Guest House is certainly not a perfect social world. Its inhabitants carry memories of loss, humiliation, conflict and displacement. The structures that have harmed them continue outside its boundaries. Yet Jannat matters because it does not require its residents to erase their differences before they can belong. Its community is assembled from lives that would not ordinarily be expected to form a family. In this sense, Roy uses an apparently peripheral location to question conventional definitions of home and citizenship.

Saddam Hussain's entry into this world introduces caste into the novel's inverted field of vision. His chosen name already indicates that identity in the novel is neither transparent nor permanently fixed. Behind it lies a personal history connected with caste discrimination and the death of his father. Roy's narrative directs attention away from caste as an abstract social problem and towards the ways in which caste is remembered through family, occupation, humiliation and anger.

Saddam's experience differs fundamentally from Anjum's. The novel does not suggest that caste marginalisation and transgender marginalisation are equivalent. Their coexistence at Jannat is significant precisely because their histories remain distinct. What they share is an experience of being interpreted through categories that precede individual recognition. In bringing them together, Roy constructs a community based not upon identical

identity but upon an ability to accommodate difference.

Dr Azad Bhartiya provides another variation of the inverted lens. Located at Jantar Mantar, he inhabits the physical space of public protest. His prolonged fasting makes his body a visible medium of dissent. In conventional political narratives, public life tends to be organised around parties, leaders, elections, laws and major institutions. Roy instead directs attention towards a solitary and eccentric protester whose political claims might easily disappear amid the noise of the capital.

Azad's importance lies partly in this disproportion between his immense catalogue of concerns and his limited institutional power. He seeks to address questions much larger than himself, yet his principal political resource is his own body. Roy treats him with humour as well as seriousness. This combination prevents him from becoming merely a heroic symbol of resistance. His eccentricity is preserved, and that preservation is central to the novel's narrative ethics. Marginal figures do not have to become idealised in order to deserve attention.

The inversion becomes more politically complex when the narrative moves towards Kashmir. Here Roy shifts from the socially marginal spaces of Delhi to a region represented in the novel through competing claims, military presence, insurgency, bereavement, surveillance and contested belonging. Rather than attempting a detached history of the conflict, the novel approaches Kashmir principally through people whose intimate lives have become inseparable from political circumstances.

Musa occupies a central position within this narrative field, but the reader does not receive uninterrupted access to him. Much of his life is encountered through Tilo, memories, documents, disappearances and returns. This partial accessibility is significant. Musa cannot easily be converted into a transparent political type. The narrative refuses to make him completely knowable, just as the conflict itself cannot be reduced to one individual's story.

Tilo becomes an important mediating consciousness. Her relationship with Musa brings private affection into contact with political history, yet she is never merely an observer standing safely outside that history. Her movements across Delhi and Kashmir place her between different worlds. She is connected to Naga and Biplab as well as Musa, and each relationship introduces a different perspective upon political reality. The result is not a balanced formula in which all perspectives become equivalent. Rather, the novel dramatises the difficulty of seeing a contested landscape from a single stable position.

Biplab's presence is especially useful in understanding the inversion of perspective. Through him, institutional language and the reasoning of state structures enter the novel. Yet his perspective does not become the controlling viewpoint. It exists beside other forms of knowledge: Tilo's memories, Musa's experience, private documents and the grief of families. Institutional vision is therefore one perspective among several rather than the unquestioned centre from which all other lives are interpreted.

This redistribution of narrative authority is essential to Roy's method. Political institutions often possess the power to name and classify: citizen and suspect, legal and illegal, loyal and disloyal, protected and dangerous. Fiction can expose the instability of these categories by shifting attention towards the people who live under them. Roy repeatedly demonstrates that an administrative or political identity never exhausts the person to whom it is applied.

The novel's documentary fragments reinforce this reversal. Notes, lists, letters, reports and testimonies appear to resemble official forms of recording, yet Roy often uses them to preserve experiences that institutional narratives might overlook. The documentary mode is therefore detached from exclusive institutional ownership. The marginal subject can also produce records, preserve memories and leave evidence.

Comrade Revathy's testimony is a particularly striking example. Her story enters the

novel through a form that emphasises the act of bearing witness. She is not simply described from outside by an authoritative narrator. Her account carries the traces of a life shaped by gender, political commitment, violence and motherhood. The significance of her testimony lies not only in what happened to her but also in the fact that she leaves a narrative behind. Testimony interrupts disappearance.

The abandoned child, Udaya Jebeen, carries this interruption into the future. She arrives without the conventional social history through which children are usually situated—stable parentage, recognised household and inherited identity. Yet her apparent absence of conventional belonging becomes the basis for another form of belonging at Jannat. The community does not ask whether she fits an established genealogy before accepting her. Her incorporation into the household therefore reverses the logic by which legitimacy is commonly inherited.

This is one of the most significant transformations produced by Roy's inverted lens. When society is viewed from established institutions, people at the margins can appear deficient because they lack recognised forms of family, identity, status or authority. When the perspective is reversed, the institutions themselves may appear deficient because they cannot accommodate the complexity of human lives. Jannat does not solve this problem at a national level, but it makes another social logic imaginable.

Animals and non-human life also contribute to this reorientation. Roy repeatedly populates the novel with creatures existing beside her human characters. Their presence broadens the narrative's attention to vulnerable life and weakens the assumption that political history concerns only recognised public actors. The novel's world is crowded with bodies, living and dead, human and non-human, remembered and forgotten. Such abundance contrasts sharply with the reductive categories through which bureaucratic and political systems often organise existence.

The inversion of the narrative lens consequently operates at several levels simultaneously. Socially, it moves towards transgender, caste-oppressed, displaced and dissenting lives. Spatially, it privileges graveyards, pavements, improvised homes and contested landscapes. Narratively, it disperses authority among multiple voices and documentary fragments. Historically, it approaches public events through memory and intimate consequence. Politically, it asks what structures of power look like when seen by people who experience their boundaries most directly.

This perspective also complicates the application of Agamben's concept of "bare life." From the viewpoint of sovereign power, vulnerable individuals may appear principally as bodies to be classified, regulated, excluded or exposed. From Roy's inverted viewpoint, however, the same individuals possess biographies that exceed such reduction. The body identified by power as marginal is simultaneously a body that remembers, loves, jokes, mourns and establishes relationships. The narrative gaze therefore works against the reduction of *bios* to mere *zōē* by restoring social and historical density to vulnerable existence.

For this reason, the novel's "worm's-eye" orientation should not be mistaken for a simple celebration of marginality. There is nothing inherently liberating about exclusion, poverty, violence or displacement. Roy does not suggest that suffering becomes valuable because it produces an alternative perspective. Rather, she asks what becomes visible when the reader is required to look at the republic from locations where its promises are least secure. The marginal viewpoint becomes critically important because it reveals the limits of narratives produced from positions of relative security.

The title *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* itself participates in this inversion. A ministry ordinarily belongs to the administrative vocabulary of government. Roy relocates the term towards an improvised community that possesses neither bureaucratic authority nor formal jurisdiction. The irony is evident, but the

metaphor is also constructive. Jannat becomes an unofficial “ministry” concerned with forms of care that cannot easily be administered: shelter, companionship, burial, memory, affection and acceptance.

This unofficial ministry does not replace the state, nor does Roy offer it as a complete political programme. Its significance is literary and ethical. It reveals that belonging can be produced through practices rather than merely declared through institutions. The inhabitants of Jannat create a community not because their identities become identical but because difference is allowed to remain within relationship.

The narrative inversion of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* therefore changes the meaning of the margin itself. The margin is no longer simply the distant edge of a stable national centre. It becomes a critical location from which the organisation of the centre can be examined. Anjum's body exposes the limits of binary classification; Saddam's memory exposes the persistence of caste; Azad's protest exposes the uneven distribution of public attention; Revathy's testimony resists disappearance; Musa and Tilo reveal the intimacy of political conflict; and Udaya Jebeen makes alternative kinship imaginable.

Together, these perspectives create a republic viewed from below rather than surveyed from above. Roy's achievement lies not simply in increasing the number of marginal characters represented in Indian English fiction, but in granting those characters epistemological importance: they become sources of knowledge about the society that marginalises them. Their experiences disclose contradictions that might remain invisible from positions closer to institutional power.

The inversion of the narrative lens thus prepares the ground for a more detailed examination of Roy's plurality of voices. Once the centre has lost its monopoly over perspective, the different margins themselves must be distinguished. Gender, religion, caste, political dissent and territorial conflict cannot be

compressed into one undifferentiated category of oppression. The next section therefore charts the novel's principal narrative voices and concerns, examining how Roy brings these different experiences into relation while preserving the historical specificity of each. In doing so, the analysis moves from the question of where the republic is viewed from to the equally important question of whose voices are permitted to describe what that republic means.

Iv. Charting Narrative Voices And Concerns

The plurality of voices in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is central to Arundhati Roy's attempt to represent a republic composed of unequal experiences. The novel does not construct marginality as a single condition shared uniformly by all those who remain outside dominant structures of social recognition. Instead, it brings together individuals whose vulnerabilities emerge from different histories of gender, religion, caste, political conflict, social hierarchy and displacement. Anjum, Saddam Hussain, Dr Azad Bhartiya, Comrade Revathy, Tilo and Musa consequently cannot be treated as interchangeable representatives of oppression. Their stories intersect, but the causes and consequences of their marginal positions remain distinct.

This distinction is essential to the idea of minimal lives developed in this paper. A life becomes “minimal” not because it lacks value but because particular structures reduce the space within which that life can be socially recognised or securely lived. The form of reduction differs from one character to another. Gender classification operates differently from caste hierarchy; religious vulnerability cannot be equated with territorial conflict; voluntary political dissent differs from exclusion produced by birth. Roy's narrative places these experiences beside one another without requiring them to become identical.

The result is a polyphonic representation of the republic. Each voice reveals a different boundary of belonging, and the accumulation of

these voices exposes the inadequacy of any single definition of marginality.

Gender, Language and Anjum's Divided Identity

Anjum's life provides one of the novel's most sustained examinations of the relationship between identity and social recognition. Born Aftab, she enters a world in which gender has already been organised into apparently stable categories. Her body unsettles those categories, and the anxiety surrounding her birth demonstrates how quickly society attempts to translate bodily difference into recognisable language.

Jahanara Begum's response to the child is especially significant because it connects maternal affection with uncertainty. Her difficulty is not simply a private emotional crisis. It reflects the larger cultural pressure to identify a child within a binary gender structure. Roy thus begins Anjum's story with an important question: what happens when a human life precedes the social vocabulary intended to describe it?

The movement from Aftab to Anjum is consequently not a simple change of name. It represents a gradual process of claiming a form of existence that the family household cannot adequately accommodate. The Khwabgah offers an alternative social vocabulary. There Anjum encounters people whose identities challenge conventional gender expectations and discovers a community in which difference can be recognised rather than merely corrected.

Yet Roy avoids presenting the Khwabgah as a perfect space of liberation. It contains hierarchies, disagreements, attachments and restrictions of its own. This complexity matters because it prevents Anjum from becoming a symbolic figure detached from ordinary human contradictions. She desires companionship, motherhood, recognition and security. Her relationship with Zainab, in particular, reveals her desire to nurture and establish forms of family that do not depend entirely upon biological or conventional kinship.

Anjum's gender identity therefore becomes inseparable from the question of social belonging. Her vulnerability does not arise simply from bodily difference but from the meanings attached to that difference. In this respect, Roy shows that marginality is produced relationally: a person becomes marginal because dominant structures define certain identities as normal and others as departures from that norm.

Religious Identity, Communal Memory and Vulnerable Belonging

Anjum's story also demonstrates that identities do not operate independently of one another. She is not only a transgender person; she is also Muslim, and the interaction of these identities becomes particularly significant when the novel places her within a context of communal violence.

Roy approaches this history principally through Anjum's experience and memory rather than through detached political explanation. What matters narratively is the transformation produced in a person who has encountered extreme insecurity. The experience continues after the immediate danger has passed. Anjum's return does not restore the psychological world she inhabited before the event. Memory becomes an internal continuation of history.

This aspect of her character is important because it prevents identity from being understood merely as a demographic label. Religious belonging is experienced through language, neighbourhood, family, memory, fear and attachment. The larger political category becomes meaningful in the novel only when translated into the particular life of a character.

Roy's representation also demonstrates how collective identities can obscure individuality. In moments of communal tension, people may cease to be perceived primarily through their personal histories and instead become representatives of a religious category. Anjum's narrative reverses that process. The reader knows her before encountering the political labels that may be imposed upon her. The individual therefore exceeds the category.

Her eventual movement towards the graveyard may be read partly in relation to this accumulation of vulnerability. Gender and religion do not simply add together as separate disadvantages; they interact within a life already shaped by questions of recognition. The minimalisation of Anjum is therefore layered. At the same time, the novel refuses to leave her permanently within the identity of victim. Her creation of Jannat represents a movement from vulnerability towards social invention.

Caste, Saddam Hussain and the Persistence of Social Hierarchy

If Anjum's story exposes the boundaries surrounding gender and religious identity, Saddam Hussain's narrative introduces the persistence of caste within contemporary social life. His chosen name conceals another identity and another history. Renaming becomes a way of responding to humiliation and reconstructing the self after an experience that has fundamentally altered his relationship with the social world.

The story of his father is central to this process. Caste appears not as an abstract remnant of tradition but as something experienced through occupation, bodily labour, humiliation, family memory and unequal social power. Saddam's anger emerges from this intimate history. His desire for revenge initially provides a direction for his life, yet Roy gradually places that desire within a wider network of relationships.

The significance of Saddam's presence at Jannat lies partly in the fact that the community does not erase his caste history. Nor does his association with Anjum imply that their experiences are equivalent. Instead, the novel places caste and gender difference within the same social space while allowing each to retain its particular history.

Saddam's adopted name is also characteristic of Roy's broader interest in unstable identity. Names throughout the novel can conceal, protect, reinvent or memorialise. The official name is not always the complete person. By drawing attention to acts of renaming,

Roy exposes the distance between institutional identity and lived selfhood.

For the argument of minimal lives, Saddam is especially important because his story demonstrates that formal modernity does not necessarily eliminate inherited structures of inequality. The contemporary republic may promise equal citizenship while social hierarchies continue to influence the dignity and security available to individuals. His narrative therefore introduces a tension between constitutional equality and lived social experience without reducing the entire republic to a single social reality.

Dr Azad Bhartiya and the Politics of Being Unheard

Dr Azad Bhartiya occupies another kind of margin. Unlike Anjum or Saddam, his marginal position is substantially connected with a deliberate practice of political dissent. His prolonged presence at Jantar Mantar turns the protesting body into a form of public communication.

The name "Azad Bhartiya" itself carries symbolic resonance, suggesting freedom and Indianness. Yet Roy treats the character with characteristic irony. His vast political concerns contrast with his limited capacity to alter the structures against which he protests. This disproportion creates humour, but it also reveals something about political visibility. The right to speak does not guarantee that one will be heard.

Azad's body consequently becomes his principal political instrument. Through fasting and continued presence, he attempts to make himself impossible to ignore. Yet his location also reveals the spatial organisation of dissent. Protest is visible but contained; political grievance is publicly expressed yet can become part of the everyday scenery of the city.

Roy's treatment of Azad resists heroic simplification. He is eccentric, excessive and sometimes comic. These characteristics do not invalidate his political concerns. Rather, they preserve his individuality against the tendency to turn the dissenter into either a hero or a nuisance.

His importance lies in the uneasy space between these classifications.

Within the framework of minimal lives, Azad represents the possibility of minimal political audibility: a person may speak continuously while possessing little power over whether that speech enters consequential public discourse.

Revathy, Udaya Jebeen and the Testimony of Dispossession

Comrade Revathy's narrative extends the novel's geography and political range into central India. Her testimony introduces a life shaped by gender, political commitment, violence and displacement. Unlike characters who receive sustained third-person narration, Revathy enters significantly through the traces she leaves behind. The form of testimony is therefore as important as its content.

To testify is to resist disappearance. It establishes that an experience occurred to a particular person and that the person sought to communicate it to someone beyond herself. Roy's incorporation of Revathy's account into the novel creates a narrative space for a life that might otherwise survive only through institutional or political categories.

Revathy also complicates the idea of political agency. She cannot be understood solely as a passive victim because her life includes ideological commitment and deliberate choices. At the same time, agency does not protect her from vulnerability. Roy allows both realities to coexist.

Her daughter, Miss Udaya Jebeen, becomes the point at which this painful history enters another possibility. The child's abandonment might initially suggest complete social disconnection. Yet she becomes incorporated into Jannat and acquires a community through relationships rather than conventional genealogy.

The transition from Revathy's testimony to Udaya Jebeen's future is therefore one of the novel's most significant movements. A history of

dispossession does not disappear, but neither is the child condemned to reproduce it in exactly the same form. Memory is carried forward through care.

Tilo, Musa and the Contested Landscape of Kashmir

The novel's treatment of Kashmir introduces perhaps its most complex intersection between personal life and political history. Roy approaches the conflict from a recognisably critical literary perspective, but the novel does not function as a comprehensive historical account of the region. Its primary concern is with the ways in which conflict enters intimate relationships, memories, identities and everyday existence.

Musa's story is central to this representation. Personal bereavement and political commitment become increasingly difficult to separate in his life. Yet he remains partly elusive. His disappearances and reappearances prevent the reader from possessing a complete account of him. This narrative incompleteness is appropriate to a character whose life is shaped by secrecy, danger and contested political belonging.

Tilo provides another route into this landscape. Her relationship with Musa gives the political narrative an intimate emotional register, but she does not merely serve as a device through which Musa can be explained. She has her own history of estrangement and her own resistance to conventional forms of belonging. Her movement between people and places makes her a connective figure within the novel's fragmented architecture.

Through Naga and Biplab, additional perspectives enter the narrative. Particularly through Biplab, the language of institutions and national security becomes visible. Roy does not allow that vocabulary to monopolise interpretation. It stands beside the experiences of families, lovers, mourners and political actors whose understandings of Kashmir differ substantially.

The importance of this polyphony is not that it produces a neutral midpoint between

incompatible political positions. Rather, it demonstrates that political language has consequences for particular lives. The novel continually moves from geopolitical abstraction towards the body, household, grave and memory.

For the present study, Kashmir therefore represents an intensified form of the problem already visible elsewhere in the novel: the instability of belonging. Territory and citizenship may appear clear on a map or in legal language while remaining deeply contested at the level of lived experience. Roy uses Musa and Tilo to explore precisely this distance.

From Separate Margins to a Community of the Unconsoled

Taken individually, these characters represent different histories. Taken together, they reveal Roy's refusal to construct the republic around a single normative citizen. The novel instead assembles what might be described as a community of the unconsoled: people whose losses and differences cannot be completely repaired by conventional social structures.

This community should not be confused with an identity group. Anjum, Saddam, Azad, Revathy, Musa and Tilo do not become equivalent because they occupy the same novel. Their experiences arise from different social and political conditions. The ethical strength of Roy's polyphony lies precisely in preserving these distinctions.

Jannat provides the clearest spatial expression of this principle. It accommodates difference without demanding uniformity. The inhabitants do not require a shared religion, caste, gender, political ideology or biological kinship in order to form relationships. Their community emerges from practical acts of living together—sheltering, feeding, caring, remembering and burying.

In this respect, Jannat provides an alternative to the logic of classification encountered throughout the novel. The larger social world repeatedly asks what category a person belongs to. Jannat asks a more immediate question: can this person be given a place?

Minimal Lives as an Alternative Archive of the Republic

The different narrative voices ultimately constitute an alternative archive. Anjum preserves histories of gender and communal memory; Saddam carries caste history through personal recollection; Azad embodies dissent; Revathy leaves testimony; Musa and Tilo preserve memories of political conflict that cannot be contained by institutional description. Udaya Jebeen receives these histories without being reducible to any one of them.

Roy's archive is consequently composed not simply of documents but of lives. Each character carries knowledge unavailable from the others. Their accumulation challenges any account of the republic that depends upon a single representative voice.

This is also where the concept of minimal lives moves beyond a vocabulary of victimhood. The people represented in the novel are vulnerable to different forms of power, but vulnerability is never the whole of their existence. They retain humour, desire, memory, political conviction, affection and the capacity to form relationships. Even where social or political structures reduce the possibilities available to them, the narrative refuses to reproduce that reduction.

The polyphony of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* therefore performs an important ethical function. It restores complexity to people whom public discourse may compress into categories. The transgender person becomes Anjum; the caste-oppressed subject becomes Saddam; the protester becomes Azad; the revolutionary becomes Revathy; the politically contested subject becomes Musa; the socially estranged woman becomes Tilo. Naming does not eliminate structural analysis, but it prevents structure from becoming the complete explanation of a human life.

Roy consequently turns the marginal subject into a witness. Each character sees a different part of the republic and carries a different history into the narrative. Their voices

collectively reveal a political community that cannot be understood adequately from the centre alone. The republic appears through its unresolved contradictions: equality beside hierarchy, citizenship beside precarious belonging, public speech beside political inaudibility, and institutional history beside private memory.

The “minimal lives” of Roy's novel are thus neither silent nor empty. They constitute a dispersed archive of survival, memory, dissent and alternative belonging. Their presence raises a further theoretical question, however. If structures of social and political power can reduce individuals to precarious forms of existence, how far can Giorgio Agamben's concept of “bare life” explain their condition? And where does that concept become insufficient for characters who continue to resist, remember, love and create communities?

The next section addresses this question by examining the novel's epic scale alongside Agamben's theories of sovereignty, exclusion and *homo sacer*. It argues that Roy exposes conditions resembling the reduction of political existence towards bare life while simultaneously refusing to leave her characters within that reduction.

V. Epic Narration And The Exposure Of “Bare Lives”

The narrative scale of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is strikingly expansive. Arundhati Roy moves across cities, regions, communities, political conflicts and individual histories, creating a fictional world that approaches the breadth conventionally associated with epic narration. Yet hers is an inverted epic. Instead of organising the narrative around heroic conquest, national achievement or the actions of celebrated historical figures, Roy constructs a large historical canvas from lives that might otherwise occupy only the margins of national memory. The scale is epic, but its subjects are frequently those whose existence has been socially, politically or historically minimised.

This inversion is crucial to understanding the relationship between narrative

form and political life in the novel. Traditional epic narratives often participate in the construction of collective identity by giving communities foundational heroes, conflicts and memories. Roy's novel performs a different task. It asks what a national narrative would look like if its history were reconstructed through the transgender person, the Dalit, the protester, the bereaved mother, the political dissenter, the displaced individual and those caught within contested political spaces. Her expansive narration therefore works against monumental history by directing attention towards vulnerable existence.

The novel's engagement with recognisable political events and public figures strengthens this effect, although such references must be approached carefully. Roy does not write as a neutral historian. Her fiction carries a recognisable critical position, frequently employing satire, irony, exaggeration and polemical commentary. Political references within the novel should therefore be understood as elements of Roy's literary representation rather than treated automatically as objective historical conclusions. The analytical significance lies in the way the novel brings large political structures into contact with individual lives.

It is at this point that Giorgio Agamben's theory of sovereign power becomes particularly useful. His concept of “bare life” provides a vocabulary for considering the unstable boundary between lives securely incorporated within political order and lives that become exposed when the protections associated with political belonging are weakened or suspended. Roy's characters repeatedly encounter such boundaries, although their experiences also reveal important limitations in applying Agamben's theory directly.

Agamben, Sovereignty and the Condition of Bare Life

In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Agamben develops his argument around a distinction derived from classical Greek terminology: *zōē* and *bios*. *Zōē* refers broadly to the fact of living, while *bios* indicates a form of life

recognised within a political and social order. Agamben's concern is with the processes through which political power establishes the boundary between these forms of existence and, particularly, with the paradoxical figure who is included within political order through exclusion.

The figure of *homo sacer* becomes central to this argument. For Agamben, *homo sacer* represents a life placed in an exceptional relation to law: neither simply outside the political order nor securely protected within it. This paradox allows Agamben to explore sovereignty not merely as the exercise of governmental authority but as the power to determine the limits of political belonging.

The concept is particularly relevant to literary representations of people whose legal, social or political recognition becomes precarious. It draws attention to a disturbing possibility: political communities define themselves not only by determining who belongs but also by establishing boundaries beyond which certain forms of life may become less visible, less protected or more vulnerable.

Roy's novel repeatedly explores these boundaries. Yet the lives represented in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* do not correspond neatly to Agamben's extreme theoretical figure. Anjum, Saddam, Musa, Revathy and others are not uniformly stripped of all political identity. They occupy different positions within society and encounter different structures of power. For this reason, "bare life" is most productive here when treated as a critical lens rather than a literal description of every marginal character.

From Bare Life to Precarious Citizenship

The concept of precarious citizenship provides a useful bridge between Agamben's theoretical abstraction and Roy's heterogeneous fictional world. Citizenship in the novel cannot be understood solely as formal legal status. It also involves the practical experience of being recognised, protected, heard and permitted to inhabit social space with dignity.

A person may formally belong to the republic and nevertheless experience that

belonging as insecure. Gender, caste, religion, political identity or regional conflict can affect the extent to which citizenship is experienced as meaningful protection. This does not mean that all such vulnerabilities are identical. Rather, the novel repeatedly reveals a distance between formal membership in a political community and the lived substance of belonging.

The term precarious citizenship captures this distance without assuming complete exclusion. It allows the analysis to recognise that Roy's characters remain social and political subjects even when their access to recognition is unstable. They continue to act within the world rather than existing merely as passive objects of sovereign power.

This modification is important because Roy's fiction is ultimately interested not only in how lives are reduced but also in how they resist reduction.

Anjum and the Social Production of Exclusion

Anjum's story demonstrates that the production of minimal life can occur through social structures as well as explicitly political ones. Her gender identity places her in tension with the categories through which family and society ordinarily recognise a person. From childhood, her difference is interpreted through an established vocabulary that proves inadequate to the complexity of her embodied existence.

The Khwabgah provides a partial alternative. Within it, Anjum finds a social environment capable of recognising identities that dominant gender arrangements frequently position outside ordinary expectations. Yet this alternative belonging does not remove her from the larger structures surrounding her. She remains vulnerable to prejudice and to the interaction between gender and religious identity.

From an Agambenian perspective, Anjum is significant because her experience demonstrates the importance of recognition to political and social existence. A body does not become socially meaningful merely by being alive. It enters networks of language, family, law,

gender and community that determine how that life can appear in public.

At the same time, Anjum cannot adequately be described as bare life. Her existence is culturally and socially rich. She possesses memory, humour, desire and the capacity to create relationships. Even when she withdraws to the graveyard, her life does not become empty. Instead, she transforms the place of apparent abandonment into a new social space.

Roy thus reverses the movement imagined in the reduction from *bios* to *zōē*. Narrative restores *bios*. Anjum is not permitted to remain a marginal body without history; she becomes a person whose memories and relationships occupy substantial narrative space.

Saddam Hussain and the Burden of Caste

Saddam's history reveals another limit of an exclusively Agambenian interpretation. Caste inequality cannot be explained fully through the theory of sovereign exception because its operation extends through social custom, inherited hierarchy, occupation, everyday discrimination and cultural practice. Power does not always appear in the form of an exceptional sovereign decision. It may be reproduced through ordinary social relations.

The death of Saddam's father and the memory attached to it shape his later identity. His adoption of the name Saddam Hussain functions as an attempt at self-reconstruction. Renaming gives him an identity different from the one inherited through caste, even though it cannot erase the history that produced his anger.

His experience therefore expands the meaning of minimal life beyond juridical exclusion. A citizen may possess formal political rights while remaining exposed to deeply embedded social inequalities. The distinction between legal equality and lived equality becomes central.

Saddam's eventual place at Jannat does not abolish caste as a historical reality. What it provides is a social relationship in which caste does not completely determine his value. Roy

thus imagines a small-scale alternative to inherited classification without suggesting that an improvised community can resolve structural inequality.

Musa and Life within a Contested Political Order

The Kashmir narrative brings Agamben's theory into more direct conversation with questions of sovereignty, territory and political authority. Within Roy's fictional representation, everyday life in Kashmir is shaped by conflict, security practices, political resistance, loss and competing claims of belonging. The novel presents these conditions through an explicitly critical literary perspective rather than offering an exhaustive account of the region's political history.

Musa's life becomes inseparable from this contested environment. His personal losses, relationships and political commitments gradually converge, making it difficult to separate private identity from political circumstance. He moves through secrecy, disappearance and return, occupying a position in which stable ordinary life becomes increasingly difficult.

Agamben's concept of the state of exception is suggestive here because it draws attention to situations in which the relationship between law, political authority and individual protection becomes unstable. Yet even in this context, Musa exceeds the condition of bare life. He possesses political conviction and makes choices. His life is not merely acted upon; he acts within the conditions surrounding him.

This distinction is ethically important. To describe politically vulnerable characters only as victims would repeat a form of reduction. Roy's narrative instead preserves the uncomfortable coexistence of vulnerability and agency.

Tilo's relationship with Musa further complicates this picture. Through her, political conflict enters a private emotional history. Love does not exist outside politics, yet neither can it be explained entirely by politics. The intimacy between Tilo and Musa prevents the latter from

becoming merely a representative of a political cause. The personal exceeds the ideological category.

Revathy and the Body at the Intersection of Powers

Comrade Revathy represents another configuration of vulnerable life. Her narrative brings together gender, political commitment, bodily violence and motherhood. The body in her story becomes a site upon which several forms of power converge.

An Agambenian reading might emphasise exposure: the body rendered vulnerable within political conflict. Yet such a reading would be incomplete if it ignored Revathy's ideological commitment and her act of testimony. She is not simply a body upon which violence is imposed. She is also a speaking political subject who attempts to preserve an account of what happened to her.

Testimony is particularly significant because it restores narrative identity to bodily suffering. Violence tends towards reduction: a complex person can become a wounded, imprisoned, missing or dead body. Testimony moves in the opposite direction by reconnecting the body with biography.

Revathy's letter therefore becomes an act against disappearance. Even when she cannot control the political circumstances surrounding her, she attempts to control something of the story that survives her.

Her daughter Udaya Jebeen extends that story beyond the limits of the individual life. The child carries no simple political meaning, but her arrival at Jannat connects histories that would otherwise remain separate. She becomes evidence that the consequences of violence can be inherited without determining the future completely.

Fugitivity and the Geography of Minimal Life

One recurring characteristic of Roy's minimal lives is movement. Characters leave homes, change names, cross regions, disappear,

return and search for spaces in which ordinary existence can continue. This repeated movement produces what may be described as a geography of fugitivity.

Fugitivity does not necessarily mean criminal flight. It refers more broadly to the unstable condition of people who cannot rely upon a permanent or uncomplicated relationship with place. Anjum moves from the family home to the Khwabgah and later to the graveyard. Saddam reconstructs himself through movement and renaming. Musa's existence depends upon disappearance and mobility. Tilo travels between different geographical and emotional worlds. Udaya Jebeen is physically transferred from abandonment into unconventional kinship.

These movements reveal that belonging in the novel is rarely given once and for all. It must be negotiated repeatedly.

This is another point at which Roy's fiction modifies Agamben. Bare life is often imagined through extreme exposure to sovereign power, whereas Roy is equally interested in the routes through which vulnerable people escape, adapt and create temporary shelters. Mobility becomes a survival strategy.

The geography of the novel is therefore shaped by the search for habitable spaces. Some are temporary; others remain dangerous; and none completely escape the larger political world. Yet the possibility of making a place within displacement prevents the narrative from becoming one of absolute abandonment.

Jannat Guest House: From Bare Life to a Politics of Belonging

Jannat Guest House provides the clearest challenge to the reduction of human existence to bare life. Its location in a graveyard makes the symbolic association unmistakable. The socially living establish their home among the physically dead. The boundary between life and death, belonging and exclusion, is deliberately disturbed.

Initially, Anjum's movement to the cemetery can be read as an extreme form of

withdrawal. A person unable to find a secure place among the living inhabits a space reserved for the dead. Yet she gradually changes the meaning of that space. The graveyard becomes habitable, and habitation develops into hospitality.

This transformation is central to the novel's political imagination. Jannat does not acquire legitimacy through state recognition, conventional family structure or social respectability. Its legitimacy emerges from practice. People are sheltered, cared for, remembered and accepted.

In this sense, Jannat reverses the logic of sovereign exclusion. Sovereignty establishes boundaries by determining who can be incorporated into political order. Jannat begins from the excluded and asks how they can live together.

The distinction can also be expressed through Agamben's vocabulary. If bare life represents the reduction of *bios* towards *zōē*, Jannat symbolically attempts the reverse movement. Biological survival acquires social form through relationship. A person is given a name, a room, companionship, work, memory and a place among others.

Yet Roy does not romanticise this community as a complete alternative state. Jannat has little power over the political structures beyond it. It cannot prevent communal conflict, caste inequality, militarisation or other forms of violence. Its politics is modest and local.

That modesty is precisely what makes it significant. Roy does not imagine "utmost happiness" as the achievement of an ideal political system. Happiness appears instead in fragile acts of hospitality created by people who have learned how uncertain belonging can be.

Beyond Bare Life: From Survival to "Utmost Happiness"

Agamben's theory helps illuminate the processes through which political orders distinguish protected life from vulnerable life, but Roy's novel ultimately refuses to remain within

the pessimism of absolute reduction. Her characters are exposed to social and political power, yet they continually demonstrate forms of existence that cannot be contained by the concept of bare life.

They remember. They rename themselves. They tell stories. They form relationships. They mourn the dead. They protest. They care for children. They preserve letters. They make jokes. They construct homes in improbable places.

These activities matter because they transform survival into social existence. Roy's narrative does not deny vulnerability; it refuses to allow vulnerability to become the complete identity of the vulnerable person.

This is where the idea of **minimal life** differs productively from bare life. Minimality describes a process of reduction without assuming that reduction has been completed. A life may be politically minimised while remaining narratively expansive. It may be socially marginal while possessing dense networks of memory and affection. It may be vulnerable to power while retaining the capacity for action.

The distinction also clarifies the epic quality of Roy's novel. Her characters are not epic heroes in the conventional sense. They do not conquer territories, found dynasties or embody a unified national destiny. Their achievements are often much smaller: remaining alive, preserving memory, loving another person, caring for an abandoned child, creating shelter or refusing an imposed identity.

Yet when these apparently small acts are placed within Roy's expansive historical narrative, they acquire another scale. Survival itself becomes historically meaningful.

The "utmost happiness" of the title should therefore not be interpreted as the elimination of suffering. Jannat does not erase the histories that brought its inhabitants together. Happiness exists alongside grief. Belonging exists alongside displacement. Life continues among graves.

This coexistence gives the title its paradoxical force. The novel's alternative community emerges not beyond suffering but from within the knowledge of vulnerability. Those who understand exclusion become capable of recognising the excluded.

Roy's inverted epic consequently culminates not in national triumph but in an improvised practice of hospitality. The republic's minimal lives do not seize the political centre. They create another centre of their own, however fragile and temporary.

Through this movement, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* both employs and exceeds Agamben's concept of bare life. The theory clarifies how political and social structures can expose individuals to precarious existence, but the novel insists upon dimensions that political theory can overlook: humour, intimacy, memory, storytelling, care and the stubborn continuation of ordinary life.

Roy's fiction therefore restores *bios* where systems of classification threaten to produce only *zōē*. Her characters remain vulnerable, but vulnerability does not exhaust them. They continue to speak and to leave traces of themselves in other people's lives.

The epic dimension of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* finally lies in this recovery of historical scale for people who might otherwise remain minor. Roy gathers dispersed and socially minimised lives into a narrative capacious enough to hold their differences without forcing them into a single political identity. The epic is rewritten from below.

The "bare lives" exposed by the novel consequently become something more than examples of sovereign vulnerability. Through narration, they become remembered lives; through testimony, speaking lives; through relationship, social lives; and through Jannat, lives capable of constructing an alternative form of belonging. This movement from exposure towards narrative presence prepares the final stage of the analysis: Roy's own authorial position and the manner in which memory, observation,

documentary detail and political commentary transform the novel into a counter-history of the republic.

Vi. Authorial Observation And Its Narrative (Re)Turn

The political force of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* does not arise solely from the subjects Arundhati Roy chooses to represent. It also emerges from the manner in which the authorial gaze moves between people, places, memories and historical events. Roy does not adopt the position of a detached observer standing outside the fictional world. Nor does she rely upon a conventional omniscient narrator who explains every character and resolves every uncertainty. Her narrative voice moves restlessly between intimacy and distance, lyricism and satire, testimony and commentary, private memory and public history. This movement constitutes what may be described as the novel's narrative "(re)turn": history repeatedly turns towards individual experience, while individual experience returns the reader to questions concerning the larger republic.

The parenthetical "re" is significant because the novel is continually engaged in acts of return. Characters return to memories that cannot be forgotten; the narrative returns to people who have disappeared from its immediate focus; places acquire new meanings when revisited; and historical events return through their continuing effects upon the present. Roy's storytelling is consequently recursive rather than simply progressive. The narrative moves forward by looking backwards, and it expands politically by returning to apparently small lives.

This structure is particularly appropriate to the paper's argument concerning minimal lives. Political and social systems may reduce individuals to categories, but Roy's authorial practice repeatedly restores what those categories omit. The transgender person is given a childhood and a chosen name; the protester is given eccentricity and humour; the politically involved character is given private attachments; the victim of violence is given testimony; the

abandoned child is given a future. Authorial observation becomes a method of returning human particularity to identities that public discourse may have simplified.

The Fictionist and the Political Essayist

Roy's position as both a novelist and a writer of political non-fiction inevitably shapes the reception of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Her fiction and essays share several concerns, but the two forms do not operate identically. An essay may advance an argument directly, identify political actors and attempt to persuade through evidence and commentary. Fiction works through character, setting, image, voice, silence, ambiguity and narrative arrangement. In *The Ministry*, these modes frequently approach one another without completely merging.

At certain moments, Roy's narrator appears close to the political essayist. Public events are named, political rhetoric is satirised, and institutional language is subjected to critical scrutiny. Elsewhere, the prose becomes intensely sensory and intimate, concentrating on bodily gestures, memories, animals, domestic spaces, graves or private conversations. The movement between these registers produces a distinctive narrative rhythm.

This combination also generates tension. Political commentary tends towards generalisation because it addresses systems and collective structures, whereas fiction depends upon particularity. Roy's strongest narrative moments often occur when these two impulses meet without one cancelling the other. A political condition becomes intelligible through what happens to a specific person, while an apparently private experience acquires significance because it is connected with a wider history.

The novel therefore cannot be reduced either to a political essay disguised as fiction or to a purely aesthetic experiment detached from public questions. Its narrative energy comes from the friction between the two.

Polyphony and the Limits of Authorial Authority

Although Roy's political commitments are visible, the novel does not depend upon one uninterrupted authorial voice. Letters, notebooks, testimonies, official documents, slogans, lists, reports and remembered conversations repeatedly enter the narrative. These materials interrupt the narrator and redistribute the act of telling.

The effect is important. An omniscient narrator could theoretically gather all the characters into a single interpretative framework. Roy instead allows different forms of language to retain their differences. Bureaucratic language does not sound like testimony; political slogans do not resemble intimate memory; Tilo's records differ from Anjum's speech; Revathy's account possesses another texture altogether.

The author therefore assumes something closer to the role of a curator of fragments. She arranges voices without making them completely identical to her own. This does not mean that the novel is politically neutral. Selection and arrangement are themselves authorial acts. Yet the multiplicity of forms prevents the narrative from pretending that one voice can contain the whole republic.

Such polyphony is particularly important when representing marginal subjects. There is always an ethical difficulty in speaking for those whose historical problem has partly consisted in being spoken for. Roy addresses this difficulty not by withdrawing the authorial voice entirely but by creating spaces in which different voices can enter the text with varying degrees of independence.

The fragmented form consequently becomes an acknowledgement of the limits of authorial authority. The writer can collect, connect and interpret, but cannot possess another person's experience completely.

Memory as a Counter-Archive

Memory occupies a central position within this narrative arrangement. In

conventional historical discourse, memory may appear unreliable because it is selective, emotional and subject to reconstruction. Fiction, however, can use precisely these qualities to reveal dimensions of experience unavailable to institutional records.

Salman Rushdie's reflections on fragmented memory in *Imaginary Homelands* provide a useful postcolonial context for understanding this process. Memory does not reproduce the past intact. It reconstructs it from surviving pieces. The broken mirror may provide fragments rather than a complete reflection, but those fragments still carry historical significance.

Roy's novel develops a comparable relationship with memory while distributing it across numerous characters. There is no single remembering narrator equivalent to Saleem Sinai. Instead, memory exists in bodies, names, letters, photographs, notebooks, graves, objects and repeated stories. The past survives because different people carry different pieces of it.

This is why the concept of the counter-archive is especially productive for *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. An archive traditionally suggests an organised collection through which records are preserved and made available for future interpretation. Roy's fictional archive is much less orderly. It consists of materials and memories that conventional historical systems might regard as secondary, subjective or insignificant.

The grave itself becomes a kind of record. A changed name records an earlier injury. An abandoned child carries the trace of a mother's history. A letter preserves a voice that might otherwise disappear. A notebook records what institutional accounts cannot completely absorb. The body of a protester functions as a public document written through endurance.

Roy thereby expands the meaning of historical evidence within fiction. History is not contained only in official documents; it also survives through the material and emotional traces left in ordinary lives.

The Authorial Voice between Lyricism and Polemic

Roy's prose frequently alternates between lyrical intensity and political sharpness. This stylistic movement is sometimes abrupt, but it performs an important function. Lyricism creates proximity, while polemic creates confrontation.

When the narrative attends closely to a person, animal, landscape or object, the pace slows. The reader is encouraged to observe what public discourse might overlook. Such passages resist abstraction because they insist upon sensory and emotional detail. A body is not simply a political category; a grave is not simply evidence of death; a city is not merely an administrative location.

Satire produces a different effect. Roy often approaches public rhetoric through exaggeration, parody and ironic naming. The language of authority can become strange when displaced from its normal context. Political slogans, media phrases and bureaucratic terminology are made available for scrutiny rather than accepted as transparent descriptions of reality.

The coexistence of lyricism and satire creates a double movement. The narrative draws the reader closer to vulnerable individuals while creating critical distance from the languages through which power describes them.

There is nevertheless a risk in politically committed fiction: characters may become illustrations of an argument. Roy's narrative frequently avoids this through eccentricity. Her characters possess habits and contradictions that exceed their political functions. Anjum is never only an example of gender marginalisation; Azad is more than an embodiment of dissent; Tilo cannot be reduced to a mediator of Kashmir; Saddam's personality extends beyond caste injury.

The preservation of such excess is important because it prevents political interpretation from becoming another form of reduction.

Tilo and the Mediation of Political Memory

Among the novel's characters, Tilo occupies a distinctive position in relation to observation. She moves between regions, social groups and political perspectives without becoming completely assimilated into any of them. Her relative mobility distinguishes her from characters whose identities are more visibly marked by particular communities, yet she remains emotionally and socially estranged.

Tilo's relationship with Musa is central to her role as a mediator of political memory. Through their connection, a large political conflict becomes entangled with affection, separation and loss. The narrative does not sentimentalise this relationship into a conventional romance. Its interruptions and silences are as significant as its moments of intimacy.

This restraint allows Roy to demonstrate that political history does not merely surround personal relationships; it alters their possibilities. Meetings, departures and absences acquire meanings that cannot be separated from the political environment in which they occur.

Tilo's notebooks and collected materials further reinforce her mediating function. She records rather than fully explains. The distinction is significant. To preserve something is not necessarily to claim mastery over its meaning. Her documentary impulse parallels the novel's own method: fragments are gathered because they matter even when they cannot be assembled into a complete explanation.

Through Tilo, therefore, Roy dramatises the ethical position of the observer. Observation does not guarantee complete understanding. The person who witnesses another's history remains limited by distance, circumstance and the opacity of another consciousness.

Personal Memory and Public History

The novel repeatedly places major public histories beside intensely private recollections. The Emergency, communal violence, caste discrimination, political protest and conflict in Kashmir enter the fictional world not as a

textbook chronology but through their effects upon individual lives.

This relationship between public and private history is central to Roy's authorial method. Public events provide contexts within which lives change, but individual experience also changes the meaning of public events. History seen through a survivor does not look identical to history presented through an institutional summary.

The difference is not necessarily one of truth against falsehood. Institutional history and personal memory answer different questions. The former may establish chronology, actors and political consequences; the latter can reveal fear, grief, uncertainty and the persistence of events within consciousness.

Roy's novel continually moves between these scales. This is the narrative "(re)turn" at work: the text approaches public history, turns towards an individual affected by it, and then returns to the larger political landscape carrying the knowledge produced by that individual's experience.

History is therefore humanised without being reduced to biography, while biography becomes political without being reduced to ideology.

Anjum: Trauma, Repetition and the Failure to "Un-Know"

Anjum's memory offers a particularly powerful illustration of this process. After her experience of communal violence, the past does not remain safely located behind her. Knowledge acquired through trauma cannot simply be reversed.

Roy's use of repetition in relation to traumatic memory captures this difficulty. The survivor may know something that she desperately wishes not to know, yet consciousness cannot restore its earlier innocence. Memory returns involuntarily.

This temporal pattern explains why the novel's chronology repeatedly breaks. Trauma does not obey linear time. An event may be over

historically while continuing psychologically. The past remains active because it is repeatedly re-experienced through memory.

Anjum's later life at the graveyard therefore cannot be separated entirely from what she has endured. Yet Roy also refuses to make trauma the final meaning of her life. Jannat emerges after devastation, not because devastation has been forgotten but because life continues while remembering it.

The distinction is central to the paper's concept of minimal life. A person may be reduced by violence to fear and survival at a particular moment, but narrative can restore the temporal dimensions of that person: who she was before, what she endured, what she remembers and what she subsequently creates.

Geography as an Archive of the Republic

Roy's authorial observation is also geographical. Delhi, Gujarat, Kashmir, Kerala and central India do not function simply as backgrounds for character. Each becomes associated with particular memories and political histories.

The movement between these locations creates a dispersed archive of the republic. There is no single landscape capable of representing the nation. Old Delhi carries histories different from those associated with Kashmir; Jantar Mantar has a different political significance from the graveyard; the landscapes connected with Revathy introduce another history altogether.

Characters transport these geographies with them. A person can leave a place without leaving its memory. In this sense, geography becomes psychological as well as physical.

Jannat eventually receives people and memories originating elsewhere. The Guest House thus becomes a meeting point not only for individuals but for different geographical histories. The republic is gathered in miniature, although never made homogeneous.

This spatial organisation reinforces Roy's rejection of monumental national geography. The nation is not represented primarily through

borders, capitals and official landmarks. It is reconstructed through routes of displacement and places of temporary shelter.

Myth, History and the Problem of National Memory

Roy also places history beside myth, rumour, popular memory and contested interpretations of the past. This mixture requires critical caution. A literary text may invoke historical explanations or political theories for rhetorical and symbolic purposes without establishing them as settled historical fact.

The significance of these materials therefore lies less in whether the novel provides a definitive version of national history than in its interest in how national memory is produced. Communities remember selectively. Certain events become monumental while others fade. Some dead are publicly commemorated; others remain private memories.

Roy's narrative challenges this hierarchy by repeatedly returning to people and events that dominant forms of remembrance may neglect. The survivor, protester, displaced person, unnamed body and grave acquire narrative visibility.

This does not produce a perfectly objective alternative history. A counter-archive also involves selection. Roy chooses which lives to foreground and which political questions to emphasise. Recognising this authorial positioning strengthens rather than weakens literary analysis because it allows the novel's politics to be examined as a constructed narrative perspective.

Authorial Observation as Ethical Alignment

Roy's narrator is therefore not neutral. The novel displays a clear ethical preference for viewing structures of power from the position of people most vulnerable to them. Yet ethical alignment does not require the narrator to transform marginal characters into flawless representatives of virtue.

Indeed, the narrative's effectiveness depends upon their imperfections. Characters can be angry, eccentric, secretive, contradictory

or politically difficult. Their right to narrative attention does not depend upon moral idealisation.

This distinction is important. If marginal characters were valuable only when heroic, their representation would remain conditional. Roy instead grants significance to ordinary, inconsistent and sometimes troubling lives.

The author's ethical alignment is consequently located less in idealisation than in **attention**. To narrate a person carefully is to resist the speed with which political language converts individuals into categories.

The extensive attention given to apparently minor lives becomes a political aesthetic. Narrative time itself is redistributed.

The Narrative (Re)turn: From Bare Life to Remembered Life

The relationship among observation, memory and narrative finally returns the discussion to Agamben. If bare life names the possibility that political power can reduce human existence towards biological vulnerability, Roy's fiction repeatedly performs an opposite movement. It expands reduced life through narrative.

The movement may be expressed as a series of transformations. A body becomes a biography. A victim becomes a witness. An abandoned child becomes a member of a community. A grave becomes part of a home. A private memory becomes historical evidence. A socially marginal person becomes a narrator of the republic.

This is why **remembered life** is a useful counterpoint to bare life. Memory does not eliminate vulnerability, but it resists erasure. A remembered person possesses temporal depth: a past, relationships, losses and effects upon others. Narrative gives that memory a form capable of surviving beyond individual consciousness.

Jannat Guest House embodies this transformation spatially, while the novel itself performs it textually. Jannat gathers people who

have experienced uncertain belonging; the narrative gathers their histories. Both create provisional homes for lives that larger structures have failed to accommodate adequately.

Roy's authorial "(re)turn" therefore involves a repeated return from abstraction to personhood. Whenever political history threatens to become too large, the narrative moves towards an individual. Whenever individual experience appears entirely private, the text reconnects it with history. Neither scale is allowed to remain sufficient by itself.

Through this movement, the republic ceases to be an abstract political entity and becomes a field of lived relationships. Its meaning is found not only in constitutions, institutions and borders but also in the unequal ways people experience recognition, security, memory and belonging.

The authorial achievement of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* lies ultimately in maintaining this movement without resolving its contradictions. Roy combines the political essayist's desire to confront public structures with the fictionist's commitment to individual particularity. Her narrator observes, comments, satirises, mourns and remembers, but also yields space to letters, testimonies, notebooks and voices that interrupt authorial control.

The resulting narrative does not offer a single history of the republic. It produces an unsettled archive in which different histories coexist and sometimes collide. What holds them together is not ideological uniformity but sustained attention to lives whose significance might otherwise be minimised.

In this way, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* transforms the minimal life from an object of sovereign and social power into a subject of memory, testimony and narrative presence. The act of telling becomes an act of historical reclamation, and the republic is compelled to encounter itself through the lives it has too easily relegated to its margins.

The narrative "(re)turn" is therefore also a return of the marginal subject to history.

Anjum, Saddam, Azad, Revathy, Musa, Tilo and Udaya Jebeen do not merely illustrate the failures or contradictions of the political community around them. Through Roy's authorial attention, they become bearers of knowledge about that community. Their memories expose the distance between formal belonging and lived recognition, while their relationships demonstrate that alternative forms of belonging remain possible even under conditions of vulnerability.

Roy's counter-history finally rests upon this double movement: power may minimise life, but narrative can enlarge its historical presence. The lives assembled in the novel remain marked by loss, conflict and uncertainty, yet they are no longer negligible. They speak, remember, leave records, create relationships and inhabit the literary archive. In returning repeatedly to them, Roy turns the margins from the endpoint of national history into a position from which the meaning of the republic itself can be reconsidered.

Vii. Conclusion: Minimal Lives And The Ethics Of The Postcolonial Republic

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* reimagines the postcolonial republic by shifting narrative attention towards people whose lives remain precariously positioned within its social and political structures. Rather than constructing the nation through a central hero or a unified historical consciousness, the novel assembles a dispersed community of transgender people, Dalits, religious minorities, political dissenters, displaced individuals, abandoned children and those whose lives have been transformed by political conflict. Their experiences are not presented as interchangeable forms of suffering. Instead, Roy preserves the particular histories through which gender, caste, religion, territory, political commitment and social exclusion shape different possibilities of belonging.

The concept of “minimal lives” developed in this study provides a way of understanding this narrative strategy. Minimality does not describe the inherent worth of the

characters represented in the novel. It identifies the processes through which social and political structures may diminish recognition, security, visibility and belonging. Roy's fiction reverses this process at the level of narrative. Characters who might be reduced to categories within public discourse acquire names, memories, relationships, desires and histories. Their lives become expansive precisely where structures of power attempt to make them small.

The fragmented form of the novel is fundamental to this recovery. Roy refuses the coherence of a single national story because the republic is experienced differently from different social locations. Delhi, Kashmir, Gujarat, Kerala and central India enter the narrative through memories and movements rather than as components of a stable geographical map. Letters, testimonies, notebooks, slogans, documentary fragments and personal recollections interrupt conventional narration. The resulting structure resembles an alternative archive in which materials excluded from monumental history acquire literary permanence.

This narrative organisation also changes the direction of the reader's gaze. Instead of viewing marginal subjects from an established political or social centre, Roy frequently makes the margin itself a position of observation. Anjum's experience reveals the limitations of rigid gender classification and the vulnerability produced when gender intersects with religious identity. Saddam Hussain's story exposes the continuing force of caste within lived social relations. Dr Azad Bhartiya represents the uncertain relationship between public speech and political audibility. Revathy's testimony demonstrates the importance of preserving a voice threatened by disappearance, while Musa and Tilo bring intimate memory into contact with the contested political landscape of Kashmir. Udaya Jebeen, in turn, carries histories of dispossession into a community capable of imagining another future.

The plurality of these experiences prevents marginality from becoming a homogeneous critical category. This is

particularly important when the novel is read through Giorgio Agamben's concept of "bare life." Agamben provides a powerful vocabulary for examining the boundary between protected political existence and life exposed to sovereign power. Roy's fictional world repeatedly brings the reader close to such boundaries. Yet her characters cannot be understood adequately as bare life alone. They retain political convictions, memories, humour, affection and the capacity to act. Their vulnerability is real, but it does not constitute the whole of their identity.

For this reason, the idea of precarious citizenship supplements the Agambenian framework. Roy's characters often remain within the political and social world while experiencing belonging as unstable, conditional or incomplete. Formal membership in a republic does not automatically ensure equal social recognition or lived security. The novel draws attention to the distance between the promise of citizenship and the unequal ways in which citizenship can be experienced.

At the same time, Roy does not allow this distance to produce a narrative of absolute despair. The transformation of the graveyard into Jannat Guest House provides the clearest expression of another possibility. Jannat is created by people whose relationships with conventional structures of family and belonging have often been uncertain. Its inhabitants do not share a single caste, gender, religion or political identity. What connects them is a practice of accommodation through which difference can exist without becoming a condition for exclusion.

Jannat should not, however, be interpreted as a utopian replacement for the republic. It cannot abolish the social hierarchies or political conflicts represented elsewhere in the novel. Its significance is more modest and, for that reason, more compelling. It demonstrates that belonging can be created through everyday practices of care, hospitality, memory and companionship. A graveyard becomes a home not because death has been defeated but because life learns to continue in its presence.

The novel's title acquires particular resonance in this context. "Utmost happiness" does not signify permanent fulfilment or the disappearance of grief. Happiness emerges within vulnerability rather than beyond it. Roy's characters carry losses that cannot simply be repaired, but those losses do not prevent the formation of new relationships. The possibility of happiness lies in being received, remembered and allowed a place among others.

Memory consequently becomes one of the novel's most significant ethical resources. Political power may classify, displace or silence, but memory preserves the particularity of lives. Roy repeatedly turns from public history towards individual recollection and then returns to history with that recollection intact. In doing so, the novel creates a counter-archive composed not only of documents but also of bodies, names, graves, letters, stories and relationships.

The narrative act itself therefore becomes a form of reclamation. To narrate a minimal life is to challenge the conditions through which that life has been rendered peripheral. Roy does not restore her characters to an uncomplicated political centre. Instead, she alters the meaning of the centre by requiring the republic to be viewed from positions it has often regarded as marginal.

This explains the unusual epic quality of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Its scale is large, but its heroes are unconventional. Historical significance is attached not to conquest or national triumph but to survival, testimony, remembrance and care. The apparently small act of providing shelter, preserving a story, adopting a child, mourning another person or refusing an imposed identity becomes part of the novel's alternative understanding of history.

The study therefore argues that Roy's principal achievement lies in transforming minimalisation into narrative presence. The vulnerable body becomes a remembered person; the marginal subject becomes a witness; private grief becomes part of public history; and the excluded individual becomes capable of creating

community. This movement does not erase the operations of power examined through Agamben. Rather, it reveals the limits of power's capacity to define the complete meaning of a human life.

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness ultimately asks the reader to reconsider what constitutes the history of a republic. If national history is composed only of institutions, leaders, laws, wars and officially recognised events, many of the lives represented by Roy will remain peripheral. If history is also understood through the everyday experiences of those who live within its consequences, the boundaries of the national narrative necessarily expand.

Roy's fragmented and polyphonic novel performs precisely this expansion. It gathers lives without making them identical, preserves memories without claiming complete historical authority, and imagines belonging without denying difference. The republic that emerges is consequently unfinished and internally contested, but it is also capable of being reimagined through the people who expose the limits of its dominant narratives.

In giving narrative permanence to these **"minimal lives,"** Roy expands the possibilities of Indian Anglophone fiction and offers a compelling re-reading of the postcolonial nation through its forgotten and unheard voices.

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Ethical Declarations**Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate**

Not applicable. This study is based entirely on literary and critical analysis of published texts and does not involve human participants, human biological material, personal data, or animal subjects. Therefore, ethical approval and informed consent were not required.

Consent for Publication

Not applicable. The manuscript does not contain identifiable personal information, images, or data obtained from human participants requiring consent for publication.

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Authors' Contributions

Both authors contributed to the conceptualisation, literary analysis, interpretation of the primary and secondary sources, drafting, critical revision, and finalisation of the manuscript. Both authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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The authors declare that the manuscript is an original work, has not been published previously, and is not under consideration for publication elsewhere. All ideas, arguments, quotations, and materials derived from other sources have been appropriately acknowledged and cited.

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