



In the Company of Specters: Forging Communal Unities in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores spectral characters marginalised on the basis of their social, religious, gender and ethnic labels in modern-day India, as depicted in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Using Jacques Derrida's concept of hauntology, taken in terms of the fear of the original event repeating itself somewhere in the future as a specter, which in turn functions as a reminder of the responsibility that humanity has to resist different forms of injustices that surround us, I have analysed how Roy's spectral characters, that is, characters who are out of place and linger across rigidly defined social categories, learn to forge unities amidst the communal divides of contemporary India under the wave of Hindutva. In the growing social fanaticism targeting different communities such as Dalits, *Hijras* and Muslims, spectral characters such as Musa, Saddam, Anjum and Tilo provide an alternative social consciousness against the backdrop of their chaotic socio-political environment which is a timely requirement in present-day India. Moreover, I have also inferred that the spectral landscapes in the novel, like the Khwabgah, Kashmir and the mall, remind the readers that the history of violence and injustice cannot be wiped away by reconstructing or destroying a physical space; they continue to haunt their surroundings both in the present and the future.

Keywords: Hauntology, specters, landscape, alternative consciousness, India

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A specter or a ghost has been given a prominent place in literature across all ages. From summoning the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present and Future in *A Christmas Carol* to the appearance of the eponymous ghost in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* or the ghost of Hamlet's father in *Hamlet*, a specter's hauntings have always yielded "a productive opening of meaning" (Derrida qtd. in Davis 11). Working with this notion in this paper, I have explored the varieties of specters presented in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* against the backdrop of communalism which has plagued India since times immemorial and has been in recent years under the wave of Hindutva. As an ideology, communalism aimed at providing communal security to people who belong to a diverse socio-cultural and religious fabric such as that of India, but what has become apparent in its methodology of categorising people under certain labels is that communalism has led to the disintegration of the Indian society into multiple factions and sub-factions since its creation. While the divisive social canvas of India provides ample space for analysing communal problems that arise time and again in this multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society, Roy's latest novel does not only flag the communal disparities that India is facing today but also presents the possibility of inter-faith and socio-communal harmony among the different communities residing in this region through her marginal characters, whom I define as spectral entities. Analysing these spectral traces via Derrida's concept of hauntology and specter, I discuss how these spectral figures learn to live within the liminal spaces of their exclusionary society, thereby forging unity without eradicating the existence or the uniqueness of their many 'others'. I argue that the spectrality of her characters does not arise from the fact that Anjum, Saddam, Tilo and Musa are ghosts of dead people speckling the fictional narrative of *Utmost Happiness*, rather, in my reading, it comes from the fact that these "ghostly" figures are "persistently present in their absence, silence, or invisibility" (Lee 10). Likewise, the term 'specter', in this paper, implies figures or characters who seem to be the odd ones out or misfits within their community. Roy's spectral characters seem out of place, lingering across rigidly defined social categories, such as Anjum who is a *hijra*, a hermaphrodite, and occupies a space beyond the binaries of the Urdu language in which "all things" are defined as "either masculine or feminine, man or woman" (8; italics in original). Like Anjum, I read Saddam, who is a Dalit by caste and chooses a Muslim name to avenge his father's murder, as a spectral character since he is hovering over different socio-religious borders, granting prominence to their presence in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*.

I build on the concept of Derridean hauntology and spectral traces in

terms of both the people and the landscape presented in *Utmost Happiness*. The underlying question of Derrida's hauntology of "whither?" and "Where will we go tomorrow" (xix) formulates the crux of this paper in which I have explored spectral traces in the novel in connection with the convulsive socio-religious and political environment of modern-day India under Hindutva and its possible future. This question of "whither" does not only bring "some *responsibility*" with it, it also leads us to reassess our current circumstances and look for possible alternatives that may lead towards "*justice*" (Derrida xviii; italics in original). In dealing with the spectral traces of the past and the present that are not only represented in the images of landscapes in the novel or have come to haunt Roy's characters, this paper opens up questions about the possible futures for the spectral characters in the world they inhabit against the backdrop of communalism as they seek possible alternatives to nurture communal unities within their society. Caught amidst the volatility of their social fabric and affected by the communal divides and violence inflicted on them in the name of attaining a greater India only for Hindus under the current wave of Hindutva, Roy's specters seek to establish their own place and space in the physical world they occupy without erasing the histories which led to their marginalisation. Hindutva, which is actively advocated by the current Indian government run by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), is an ideology that promotes Indian nationalism in favor of the Indian Hindus and strives to attain a country purely for the upper caste Hindus. As a consequence, many communities are being marginalised and alienated rather viciously in India today, specifically Muslims and secluded castes. On June 17th, 2019, a young Muslim man named Tabrez Ansari was brutally tortured on suspicion of a bike-theft, made to chant Hindi verses and lynched by a charged mob even as his video became viral across social media. In July 2019, three men from the state of Bihar were set upon by charged villagers because they were seen loading a cow in a truck. A Muslim man was killed. In the 2020 Delhi riots, Muslim neighbourhoods became sites of carnage as people protested against the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) which grants Indian citizenship to religious minorities from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh and is viewed by Indian Muslims as an "agenda" by the BJP to "marginalize the Muslims" of India ("Citizenship Amendment Bill"). Incidents of such communally driven violence have tarnished India's recent socio-political history. What needs to be understood is that this polarisation and communal violence will not lessen unless people as individuals and a "community become aware of their difficulty" and "develop an alternative consciousness" (Arulnathan 4) in order to emerge from the complexities of communalism. Roy's novel, in this

respect, offers the possibility of precisely this form of alternative consciousness via her spectral characters, an analysis of which makes this research timely.

The Specter of Communalism and a Haunted India

India's current obsession with attaining "a sort of Hindu-Pakistan" (Roy, *Utmost* 165) has led to socio-communal fanaticism in the region which is enveloping Muslims, Dalits, and Christians alike. Since Roy's spectral characters in *Utmost Happiness* belong to these communities, it provides her with the space to comment on and critique her society's socio-political narrative which has been thriving on the colonial paradigm of the subcontinent. The parallels drawn between both the colonial ideology of dividing the people of the subcontinent along socio-religious lines is presently seen in "the evil demons" of Hindutva too which aims to eradicate "not just indigenous people, but everybody who (is) not Hindu" (Roy, *Utmost* 87). Just as the British Raj in the subcontinent introduced systemised communalism in the region (Bates 1; Simeon) through different reforms and policies,¹ augmenting the belief that different communities, especially Hindus and Muslims, cannot live together, the advocates of Hindutva compare "the Muslims of India to the Jews of Germany" (Roy, *Utmost* 41) and wish to cleanse India of the Muslim community and declare it as a Hindu state exclusively for the upper caste.

Moreover, in the wake of 9/11, "ideologues" of Hindutva staunchly declare Muslims to be terrorists and adhere to the belief that "the Musalmaan . . . doesn't like the Other" and spreads "His Faith . . . through Terror" (Roy, *Utmost* 41) which is why this community has been targeted. While this notion has become the baseline for legitimising hatred against the Indian Muslim community by the "saffron parakeets"² who believe that the only true place for the Muslim community is either "The Graveyard or Pakistan" (Roy, *Utmost* 62), the community also faces extreme backlash from the Indian people in general and the followers of the Hindutva ideology in particular due to their hermaphroditic qualities. Even though the *Hijras* are considered to be blessed in Hindu mythology, their existence in their society is nonetheless unacceptable because people are unable to place them in any definitive gender category and this community is left to find a place of its own in the Indian society. Similarly, Dalits have also been ideologically and socially ostracised since times immemorial both in the Indian society at large and within the caste hierarchy due to their profession as skimmers. As a consequence, they continually face physical violence in this region.

¹ For further reading, please refer to the article "Communalism in Modern India: A Theoretical Examination" by Dilip Simeon.

² Roy uses this term to refer to the staunch followers of the Hindutva ideology since these people usually wear a saffron colored headband in public to represent their affiliation.

In 2017, Irshad Khan's father was lynched and tortured by "self-styled 'gau rakshaks'" because he was a dairy farmer.³ Khan pleaded with the government to take action against the "cow vigilantes" who have made it difficult for the Indian Muslims and Dalits to live in peace in their home country ("Alwar Lynching").

The chaotic backdrop, the similarity between the colonial raj and Hindutva bring to one's attention "a subtle sense of stagnancy, sense that everything that happened happened before" (Roy, *Utmost* 16) and that history may be repeating itself even after seventy years of independence. Just like the British Raj ultimately led to the partition of the subcontinent, the traces of the colonial past that have become visible in contemporary India leave one with a feeling that somewhere in Indian "history's inventory" everything has "already been written, sung, commented upon" which is why it gives a sense that "nothing new" may "be possible" (Roy, *Utmost* 16) in terms of India's future.

While politics has established and augmented socio-religious labels and categories such as Hindus, Muslims, or Dalits in modern-day India that are defining Hindutva's aim in achieving a country exclusively for the upper caste Hindus, capitalism has demarcated who is more deserving of living in modern India. With India's image at stake on the global front and its drive to revolutionise itself in accordance with the international-market, it is the already secluded section of the Indian population which is plunged into the darkness of poverty and perplexity that is "pay the price of Progress" (Roy, *Utmost* 99). India's advancement towards modernisation has worsened communal rifts among different factions, and it is this idea which is dealt with in detail in the next section.

The Horrors of Capitalism in Contemporary India

The complexities of communal violence in modern-day India are not simply based on religious, ethnic, gender or social stigmas but have acquired monstrous proportions with India's ambition to modernise itself in the open-market. As an emerging new "supercapital" (96) India has left many wondering about the "300 million" (Roy, *Capitalism: A Ghost Story*) people who have been affected by the GDP growth rate in which only the elite of this society enjoy the luxuries and material privileges of the new (neo-) market while the rest of the Indian population adversely suffers from this economic boom. The country's efforts to abandon "the exotics," that is., things and people that seem too backward for "the New India—a nuclear power and an emerging destination for international finance" (Roy, *Utmost* 38), have become exceedingly visible over the years especially through

³ Gau Rakshak are known as the 'cow protectors' who are a Hindu nationalist and right-wing federation of cattle protection movement.

landscape changes. People, who fall under the statistics of the 300 million, are displaced, their lands captured for ‘official’ purposes such as constructing dams, infrastructure or factories, and their homes destroyed with no place left for them to go. While some higher officials of the Indian government believe that moving people out of their “villages. . . to the cities” is a good “business model” (Roy, *Capitalism: A Ghost Story* 1) for better social growth and country’s image, not many are in favour of this notion. Roy notes that one of the judges in “Bombay called slum dwellers pickpockets of urban land” (Roy, *Capitalism: A Ghost Story* 1) while another one stated that the “poor who couldn’t afford to live in cities shouldn’t live in them” when passing out a verdict on “bulldozing unauthorized colonies” in the cities. Similarly, an Indian state minister also stated in an interview that those who travelled from villages towards cities “were mostly criminals and ‘carried a kind of behaviour which is unacceptable to modern cities’” (Roy, *Capitalism: A Ghost Story* 1), this leaves one to deliberate that with official statements such as these misfits, who are unable to find a belonging both in rural and urban localities, are “mashed into the grass they slept on” (Roy, *Utmost* 257). Just as Anjum, Musa, Saddam or Tilo questioned their society in reference to who or what belonged to them, in the same manner, these real-life specters are left to wonder where they supposed to go and “which corner of this huge country meant for them” (Roy, *Capitalism: A Ghost Story* 1-2).

In a landscape where a twenty-seven storey private residence building, Antilla,⁴ stands majestically in Mumbai brightening up the night sky with its gleaming lights and paying tribute to global capitalism, the site of people cramped on pavements seems like a “public prison on the public footpath” (Roy, *Utmost* 127) when juxtaposed with Antilla’s grandeur. It makes one wonder about the disparity this country holds for its own people. While a handful of “Rulers” are able to enjoy “the width of the roads, the height of the trees, the unpeopled pavements, the clipped hedges, the low white bungalows” that have become apparent features in those parts of the Indian cities that are strictly for the upper class, the same city seems to grow “less sure of itself” in other localities (Roy, *Utmost* 135). Pavements are overcrowded with people because they have nowhere else to go and consider it a blessing to find a place where they are able to inhale the “diesel exhaust fumes from passing trucks and buses” which act as an “effective mosquito repellent” (Roy, *Utmost* 256). In a country where dengue and malaria are as common as houseflies and good national and international medical facilities are available only to those who have the money for it, these fumes work as a protective gear for the people on the footpaths. Moreover, the conditions of the local hospitals reserved

⁴ Owned by Mukesh Ambani, one of the richest person in India.

for middle and lower middle classes is extremely dire. Local hospitals are “so full of sickness that patients and their families” seem to be spilling out of the premises and are left with no other option but to camp out on the roads as they pray for either their own or a loved one’s recovery (Roy, *Utmost* 136).

In this way, capitalism has not only divided Indian society by demarcating localities and privileges made accessible only to a small population but has also seized historical sites in its beast-like claws. Many archaeological remains have been razed to the ground to not only build a better and modern infrastructure but also “as an expression of cultural nationalism” (Afzal). This was witnessed “in an abominable act of anti-Muslim frenzy” (Baabar), i.e., the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 and of the Wali Dakani’s shrine in Ahmedabad which was replaced by a Hanuman temple in 2002.⁵ Although a “tarred road” has been “built over it, erasing every sign that it ever existed,” nevertheless, “the people who continued to leave flowers in the middle of the new tarred road where the shrine used to be” could not be stopped by the police or the government from paying their respect to the late Wali (Roy, *Utmost* 46). This reinstates the fact that money and modernisation cannot wipe away love and history.

Similarly, the image of the mall from *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* also signifies the association between communal violence and capitalism. Erected on the same place where Saddam had tragically lost his Dalit father to the brutality imposed upon him for carrying a cow carcass, the mall symbolises India’s rapid growth and advancement in the globalised world. While the instigator of this tragic event “was just trying to take advantage of the political climate of the time” which led to the father’s untimely death and made Saddam “a part of the mob that killed father” (Roy, *Utmost* 88-89), the same place became a symbol of “Progress” (Roy, *Utmost* 99) in a part of a country which “was trying, quickly, clumsily and tragically to turn itself into the city” (Roy, *Utmost* 410) years later. While numerous Dalits remain unaccounted for in this country, as they have been killed due to their denigrated position in the social hierarchy and subjected to physical brutality inflicted upon them due to their profession as skimmers, the fact that a “bright shopping arcade” (Roy, *Utmost* 412) stands tall promotes India’s vision on modernisation and brands this country as a progressive nation.

This is not to say that privatisation has not had a positive material effect on the Indian economy, but the “funding has fragmented solidarity in ways that repression never could” (Roy, *Capitalism: A Ghost Story* 37). “Poverty” has become “an identity problem” in this region and those belonging to the middle or lower-middle class have been deprived of their “social, political, and economic context”

⁵ Part-human and part-monkey, Hanuman is a Hindu god from the epic *Ramayana*.

which makes their plight “an issue of identity, a battle of props and costumes” (Roy, *Capitalism: A Ghost Story* 36-37). These people, who include Muslims, Christians, Dalits and Adivasis⁶—“driven from their villages, living in slums and shanty colonies in small towns and megacities” (Roy, *Capitalism: A Ghost Story* 12)—are unable to find their place in the contemporary Indian socio-political narrative. The current “privatization of India’s mountains, rivers, and forests” that also “involve war, displacement, and ecological devastation” (Roy, *Capitalism: A Ghost Story* 11) is augmenting communal resistances. In 2006, “ten platoons of police” opened fire on villagers who had gathered to record their anger against “inadequate compensation for their land” near a Tata Steel plant killing a number of the local people. Years later, and despite the fact that the “villagers remain under siege by armed policemen, the protest has not died” (Roy, *Capitalism: A Ghost Story* 11). In a similar manner, the Salwa Judum’s⁷ barbarity against the Adivasis living in the Indian forests has only resulted in strengthening the resistance and swelling the ranks of Maoist guerrilla army in the region. In an attempt to clear out the plantation areas, many tribal people have been “raped, and murdered” by the Salwa Judum; houses were burnt, and 350,000 people were compelled to flee from their localities (Roy, *Capitalism: A Ghost Story* 13). This type of communal violence against specific unprivileged communities is increasing social and communal divides within this society. The question to ponder upon then is that if “India fallen in hate,” can the vulnerable people “oppose” the “barbaric hatred of the current regime and its supporters?” (Roy, “The Graveyard Talks Back”).

As those in economic and political power become stronger, it is the Indian proletariat who are under continuous attack. Drastically reduced job opportunities are putting “Hindu against Muslims, Hindus against Christian, Dalit against Adivasi, caste against caste, region against region” (Roy, *Capitalism: A Ghost Story* 45) as people fight for their right to social and religious security. What we need to ask ourselves is how does capitalism “colonize our imagination, how does it tame us . . . make us into people that we don’t even know we are” (Roy, *Capitalism: A Ghost Story*)? Can “the hate” which is “armed to the teeth and protected by all machinery of the state” subdue the rising chants of “azadi,” that is, freedom in India? (Roy, “The Graveyard Talks Back”). In a simpler sense, the question to be asked is “where tomorrow?” (Derrida xviii). The only way to figure out the answers to these harrowing questions would be if these inquiries came from someone who is forced to live “outside the system” and has been “silenced already” (Roy, *Capitalism: A Ghost Story* 20) in modern-day India. Only such

⁶Tribal people of the subcontinent who have settled either as foragers or tribalistic sedentary communities.

⁷A government-backed resistance movement against the Maoists.

individuals can raise these haunting questions and that is precisely what we see in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*.

Spectral Characters in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

With capitalism on the rampage and communal violence on the rise under the current wave of Hindutva in India, one is left with the question of “whither” (Derrida 45) that is, where is this society heading? Ranging from the mass killings of the Indian Muslims in the Gujrat Massacre in 2002 to the forcible cremation of the brutally tortured body of a gang-raped teenaged Dalit girl in 2020 (“Rape and Killing of Dalit Woman Shocks India”), India’s violence-laden history has garnered global concerns. Through Saddam, Anjum, Musa and Tilo, who have borne the brunt of physical and emotional violence as well as social ostracism within their society, Roy deploys the same concerns for her society as people in the region are forced to reassess their social environment and history, and explore possibilities for a better future. These spectral characters build an alternative Indian social consciousness to nurture communal unities among various factions. Carrying traces of both their individual and collective communal histories, Roy’s spectral characters are constantly negotiating with their social environment and with the labels whose boundaries they continually exceed. Tilo, an Indian-Christian, is able to relate to the pain of the Kashmiri “Maaji- The Mothers of the Disappeared in Kashmir” (Roy, *Utmost* 299) who have lost their young ones in the ongoing occupation because Tilo herself was never given the love and care of her mother, or Musa, a Kashmiri, who becomes part of a Kashmiri militant group because he lost his wife and child in a shoot-out by the occupation, realises that the ongoing war in Kashmir cannot be won by taking up arms. These specters are able to relate to the pain of all those communities who have been marginalised in this region under one pretext or the other since they themselves linger between different socio-religious and ethnic boundaries they occupy. This recalls the play *Hamlet* through which Derrida postulates his theory of hauntology. He argues that the ghost of Hamlet’s father had appeared to remind his son of the injustice Hamlet’s uncle had done to attain the throne, thereby leaving Hamlet with the responsibility to avenge his father’s murder by killing the murderer. Hamlet is thus plagued, even glaciated, by the horrendous anticipation of the repetition of the murderous act. This anticipation attached to the “repetition” of an “event” is called “*hauntology*” (Derrida 10; italics in original). A specter therefore, like King Hamlet’s ghost, is a reminder of the responsibility that we, as societies, bear on our shoulders the injustices done in our surroundings which demand an

immediate redressal so that they may not be replicated in future.

In line with Derrida's conceptualisation of specters, Roy's spectral characters do not only work to haunt the present and to remind of a past injustice, they also awaken a sense of responsibility. They remind the readers that despite being "slaves" they "don't necessarily have to be stupid," (Roy, *Utmost* 359), going on about their lives without questioning or reassessing the socio-political environment they live in even as it deteriorates. They create the feeling of discomfort or unease that one feels when left to the question regarding where they are headed in the divided world that they occupy. This is the question Roy deliberates on through Tilo, Saddam, Anjum and Musa, in regards to the Indian society under the regime of Hindutva which is adamant on making this region a Muslim free state declaring that they deserve only two places: either the graveyard or Pakistan (Roy, *Utmost* 62). Things have been made more volatile because of caste discrimination which has further supplemented social fanaticism in this region making it difficult for the Dalit community to live peacefully in modern-day India due to their profession as skimmers. The fact that "nobody" is paying "much attention" to the atrocities inflicted on different communities in India is the reason why the violence "went on and on" (Roy, *Utmost* 326).

Her spectral characters establish a "dialogue" with us because "engaging with spectral secrecy the very condition of future justice" (Davis 88) and this engagement can direct us "towards . . . the past or the not yet formulated possibilities of the future" (Davis 11-13). Since Derrida takes the specter as a "coming threat" that may point us towards abnormalities or injustices that may have existed in the past or "threats" that may be lurking in the future (48), therefore, analysing these characters does not only foreground the dangers of the socio-communal disparities existing in modern-day India but also represents an alternative form of history-making by offering a social critique of the contemporary society in order to forge a better future. Thus, her spectral characters are at odds with their society because they question their social fabric and are able to comprehend that living under such circumstances would not usher in a happier future.

One such character, Anjum, is unable to find a place within her blood family because they could not accept that their son (Anjum born as Aftab) possessed womanly traits and would be known as a *Hijra* (Roy, *Utmost* 8) in the society and thus would bring the family dishonor. While the outside world pre-empts her respectable social existence, the universe provides her with the opportunity to explore the cross-over between different worlds that exist within her. After all, she is Anjum, a constellation, a compendium of worlds within worlds. A Muslim

by birth, possessing both manly and womanly qualities, and socially ostracised like a Dalit because of the social label of a *Hijra* attached to her, Anjum is able to place herself in everyone's situation and understands the troubles people have to face in modern-day India. Her sense of unity with her fellow citizens does not lie within specific categories of religion, gender, or social status, but because of her liminal gender that crosses experiential boundaries, Anjum can readily comprehend all walks of life. Like a specter, she flits across constraining labels and definitions and encapsulates an experience that embraces differences.

Being a victim of the Gujrat Massacre of 2002 that wreaked violence against the Muslim community, Anjum realises that being a Muslim in modern-day India also puts them at a high risk of social victimisation in the rising wave of Hindutva. Having womanly qualities that are more apparent over her manliness, Anjum also understands that in male-dominated India, women experience many forms of social oppression. From being required to follow a strict dress code to being blamed if they are unable to produce an heir in this society (Roy, *Utmost* 19-21), women are oppressed due to their gender-based labels. Moreover, becoming friends with the meaningfully named Dalit called Saddam gives Anjum the opportunity to comprehend the lives of the untouchables in the Indian society because just as the *Hijras* are placed beyond the categories of a man or a woman, the untouchables are also dehumanised in this society, hence, both of these groups have been socially ostracised. Therefore, as a specter, Anjum is not bothered with social labels such as "Muslim, Hindu, man, woman, this caste, that caste" (85), rather, as a Hijra who is living across and within different kinds of borders defining gender and social categorisations, Anjum is open to accepting people beyond categorisations. Roy describes her as "a shelter, a person who . . . lives outside society's normative definitions" (Dasti). This is why since Anjum's birth, people had been unable to "*place her*" (Roy, *Utmost* 154; italics in original) and she seems to be the odd one out. Moreover, since she is able to place herself within a variety of situations and people around her, she embodies a "mehfil, gathering. Of everybody and nobody" (Roy, *Utmost* 4; italics in original) always existing and yet not existing within certain social, religious and biological boundaries.

Similarly, Saddam's visibility as a specter in the novel appears through his invisibility, due to his caste, in the Indian social fabric. By making a Dalit one of her major spectral characters, Roy explores the subalternity of this community in contemporary India by giving voice to the voiceless and making Saddam the voice of the Dalit consciousness. Roy explains that "Saddam has an incendiary border running through him" (Dasti); he is born a low-caste Hindu but chooses to use a

Muslim name after he witnessed his father's murder (Roy, *Utmost* 89) because the frenzied crowd would not accept the plea of Saddam's father and his companions that they were only transporting a dead cow's carcass.⁸ The choice to use Saddam, as "his chosen name" over his original name Dayachand (Roy, *Utmost* 85) carries a great implication; choosing a Muslim name gives him the benefit to escape the Indian caste hierarchy and, consequently, the social and ideological atrocities that have become the norm in the lives of the untouchables. Since carrying a Hindu name would have made him psychologically suppressed, Saddam's choice of using a non-Hindu name relieves him of those barriers and gives him "the courage to do what had to do and face the consequences" (Roy, *Utmost* 90). Moreover, the name Saddam is an explicit allusion to Saddam Hussain, the world-famous dictator who ruled over Iraq for more than two decades. In fact, Roy's Saddam accepts that Saddam Hussain's "courage and dignity" (Roy, *Utmost* 90) on the gallows was the inspiration behind his choosing this name, and thereby cheekily subverts the negative connotations ascribed to the name. Through this act, Roy's Saddam wishes to accomplish the same poise Saddam Hussain had displayed before the millions he stood against to imply that he too is standing up against the atrocities that are being hurled on the Dalit community for centuries. Therefore, changing the name gives Saddam the opportunity to regain and re-establish his social identity on his own terms.

In this regard, Roy's Saddam can be taken as the revenant that is, the ghost, of the political figure, Saddam Hussain, returned to take up a stand against his oppressors in a place "where the odds are stacked against him" (Dasti). As a specter, Saddam's narrative opens up and brings to our attention the injustices that his community has to bear only because the labels of "Chammar⁹ . . . Dalit . . . 'untouchable'" (Roy, *Utmost* 85) are attached to their social position. As a spectral character in search of a better and happier future in his country, Saddam, who was initially on the path "to escape past and all that had circumscribed" his life (Roy, *Utmost* 121), realises at the end of the novel that the fight for a just world for the Dalit community cannot be achieved overnight, but as long as the people in India make an effort to bring them justice, a bright future for this community may hold some hope.

Tilo is another spectral character in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* and Roy describes her as a "girl without a past, without a caste" (161) because Tilo is born out of wedlock and is a Christian woman. Being born as an illegitimate child

⁸ A cow is considered a sacred animal in the Hindu religion and is as a god.

⁹ *Chammar* or the untouchables, who are taken as the lowest amongst the caste rank in the Hindu Caste system, are called as such because of tanning leathers. The root word of *Chammar* is taken from Sanskrit and means 'skin worker'.

and that too a girl and a Christian in this society only added to her misery. Tilo is seen as the “girl who didn’t seem to have a past, a family, a community, a people, or even a home” (Roy, *Utmost* 155) which makes her the odd one out within the male dominated society of India. One of Tilo’s friends is unable to comprehend how a woman survives in a situation like that of Tilo’s who was “absolutely alone” (Roy, *Utmost* 160) and she neither had her father’s name nor caste that could help her assimilate into the Indian social system and provide her with some social standing.

What adds to Tilo’s spectral aura is the fact that since she has lived life outside strict social enclosures through which she could be labelled, this character is “somebody who thinks, who understands and who lives on the edge of many things, who has all kinds of borders and boundaries running through her” (Dasti). She seems to be like a specter, an odd entity, because she becomes a voice for the socially marginalised Indian people in general. Since she does not have a permanent home, she empathises with the people who have to survive on the pavements and die slow deaths. Having lived a life all alone, Tilo also realises that women in her society were vulnerable beings because, except for the moral and ethical value attached their gender, “nothing in the city belonged to” them (Roy, *Utmost* 301). The women were only considered as symbols of familial respect and dignity. Tilo can also relate to the pain of the Kashmiri “Maaji(s) The Mothers of the Disappeared” (Roy, *Utmost* 300), who have lost their beloved children in the ongoing conflict in Kashmir because she knows what it means to have no familial love. She realises that either the “mothering instinct” of the Maajis should be excised to relieve them of the pain they suffer, or someone should come with an “efficient Quantum of Hope” (Roy, *Utmost* 299-300) that would let these Kashmiri mothers survive without the hope of their children’s return. As a spectre, who hovers over “all kinds of borders” (Dasti), Tilo presents the readers with an empathetic reading of different social conundrums that are prevalent in contemporary India.

As a specter, she raises the pivotal question of responsibility for the readers that is, “to whom did it matter? Did those to whom it mattered matter?” (Roy, *Utmost* 257). By raising such a question, Tilo becomes a spokesperson for the general public in her society which needs attention and deserves a better future too. Growing weary of her social environment, the “strange place” which had “become an even stranger one” (Roy, *Utmost* 413) and as a specter in search of a better future in India, Tilo realises that the “wounds” that she shares with the many people in India and the Kashmiri Maajis “were too old and too new,

too different and perhaps too deep, for healing” (Roy, *Utmost* 362). Yet, what binds Tilo together in the nameless borders that connect her with these people is the fact that “they were able to pool” their wounds “and share the pain equally, without naming the injuries or asking which was whose.” Even though it may be “for a fleeting moment” but by joining in their pain, Tilo felt that “they were able to repudiate the world they lived in and call forth another one, just as real” (Roy, *Utmost* 362) in the hope that someday the pain that they all felt may cease.

Lastly, Musa as a spectral character fighting for Azadi, that is, freedom, in Kashmir, is portrayed as a ghost, “a shadow among shadows” (Roy, *Utmost* 270) because of his name-sake Commander Gulraiz who is killed in an ambush. Through Musa, Roy highlights the on-going conflict and occupation in Kashmir and the plight of these people who have lived in the war-torn land, the “*Vale of Tears*” (Roy, *Utmost* 327; italics in original), for almost a century. Although Musa understands that the Kashmir issue has become rather complex over the years because radicalisation has become evident among the Kashmiri people too, but what makes him different in this narrative is the fact that he realises that the issue of Kashmir may not be resolved through conflict and war. The fact that Kashmir’s special status under the Indian Constitution’s Article 370 has been currently revoked and it is under a total lockdown implemented by Narendra Modi’s government since 5th August 2019 makes Musa’s account of Kashmir all the more significant. According to Musa, “nobody paid much attention” to what has been happening in Kashmir which is why the “cruelties” under the occupation have become a norm, “gathering people into its unhinged embrace” (Roy, *Utmost* 326) over the years. Roy cannot help but ask who should be blamed for the havoc that has become a part of this valley and its people because “all the protagonists on all sides,” be Indians, Pakistanis or even Kashmiris too, are “exploiting” the “fault line mercilessly” (181).

Musa is of the view that in order to fight the occupation, the Kashmiri people would have to resolve to the same unthinking, single-minded “*stupidification*” (Roy, *Utmost* 371; italics in original) that is apparent in the Hindutva ideology, which attempts to eradicate differences that exist on social and religious levels among the different communities residing in India. Yet, as I have argued elsewhere, what makes Musa’s idea of becoming ‘monolithic’ different from the Hindutva ideology is its inclusive approach which embraces differences instead of similarity in contrast to the exclusiveness of Hindutva which caters to the upper-caste Hindus only. Musa propagates the idea that in order to face the enemy who reinforces social categorisation, the people of India and Kashmir would

need to work beyond categories, differences, and hierarchies and stand united in this effort. The simplification and standardisation that Musa refers to in his approach in dealing with the issue of Kashmir is a hope for the unification of the Indians and Kashmiris against the forces that are enhancing communal prejudices in the society. Hence, as a specter reaching out for a utopia and the freedom for Kashmir, Musa understands the gravity of the situation he is dealing with, all the while uniting him with the Kashmiri people for whom the idea of freedom is too beautiful and heart-breaking (Mir 76).

Through these four characters with various boundaries crisscrossing them, what I have inferred is that Roy's spectral characters cannot be taken as naïve or pessimistic about their situations, but the fact that they learn to live and deal with their histories while they search for better future prospects is what brings hope. In the same manner, Roy also uses the landscape and ecology as a spectral form that becomes a reminder for the characters and the readers that histories and their traces linger on in timeless boundaries.

Timeless Histories in New Stories: Public Places and Spaces as Specters

Roy deploys various landscapes as ghost-like figures that remind the readers time and again of the traces of history embedded within them. The image of the mall, the Khwabgah, and the innumerable references to Kashmir's beauty now lost due to decades of occupation operate as specters and remind the readers that history cannot be erased nor can violence be completely relegated to oblivion. Those who are deleted brutally, remain to haunt the present. In *Utmost Happiness*, places like "the Khwabgah—the House of Dreams", the "Jannat Guest House and Funeral Service", the "mall" (Roy, *Utmost* 19, 80, 410) and the region of Kashmir hold a prominent position because all of her spectral characters are associated with some of these places and learn to develop newer identities alongside their older ones within these spaces.

The Khwabgah or the House of Dreams, as is the literal translation of the word, implies spectrality in the name itself. Just as a dream feels both real and unreal to the person asleep, the Khwabgah became a dream-like place of refuge for Anjum and many others like her who hoped to find happiness and whose "dreams . . . could not be realized in the Duniya" (Roy, *Utmost* 53).¹⁰ This Duniya was the Indian society at large that failed to accept these socially and biologically different people. The Khwabgah's dilapidated physical structure represented "the gates of Paradise" (Roy, *Utmost* 19-20) for Anjum when she first saw the building. It

¹⁰ Roy implies the word Duniya, which is literally translated as 'the world', to the Indian society set against the different social realm that the *Hijras* occupy in the Indian society.

felt even more welcoming once Anjum “stepped through an ordinary doorway” of the outside world that had become unbearable in the Indian society, “into another universe” (Roy, *Utmost* 25) of the unfulfilled dreams and happiness that Anjum had not been able to find in the proximity of her ancestral home. The spectrality of the Khwabgah resides in the fact that even though the physical appearance of the building may not have appeared very different from the adjacent infrastructures in the neighbourhood, what it represented to the transgender community was a place and a space where “Holy Souls trapped in the wrong bodies were liberated” (Roy, *Utmost* 53). This characteristic is precisely what places the Khwabgah in an odd proximity to the neighborhood. This is because it not only lingers between the borders of hope and reality of the community, it also represents a proximity where “no ordinary woman would have been permitted” (Roy, *Utmost* 18) despite the fact that *Hijras* share some physical and emotional traits with the female gender. Although the building stood weary in its neighborhood, the life it breathed in the transgender community made it seem like “it was the only place in world where felt the air made way” (Roy, *Utmost* 19) for these ostracised people.

Not only was the Khwabgah a home for the transgender community but the vicinity’s foundation was based on “*manzoori*. Consent” (Roy, *Utmost* 53; italics in original) This allowed the people in the Khwabgah to approach matters differently through “surmise” and sympathy (Roy, *Utmost* 53), in contrast to the outside world which imposed its labels and stigmas onto people. This inclusivity made this public space an odd entity. It remained a place of liberation and happiness for Anjum until newer residents came in and brought about a drastic change in the homely environment of the Khwabgah forcing her to leave the place and subsequently construct the Jannat Guesthouse.

Located in a graveyard, this “ravaged, feral spectre” (Roy, *Utmost* 63), the Jannat Guesthouse, initially becomes a home for Anjum and was later occupied by other residents as well. As a spectral space, it defies social categorisations and welcomes anyone who is fed up with their society and wishes to live in harmony with one another regardless of caste and creed. Anjum designs her Guesthouse in an odd manner; she starts building her rooms around different graves that were already present in the graveyard as if to extend her invitation to the dead into the living world and share their secrecy of the immortal world. Roy explains that “ordinarily,” Anjum may have felt threatened in such a setting but “her desolation protected her” since it relieved her from “social protocol” (Roy, *Utmost* 61) of keeping up with the world she occupied. As a ghostly figure lurking at the margins of the society, she felt at home with the ghosts in the graveyard.

While “the Duniya” that is, the Indian society, has created communal disparities and has wreaked violence on the people belonging to different religious, social and gender-based categories, the Guesthouse opened its doors to “the dead (as well as ... the living) . . .welcoming” anyone with only “one clear criterion . . . that Jannat Funeral Service would only bury those whom the graveyards and imams of the Duniya had rejected” (Roy, *Utmost* 79-80). In juxtaposing the dissimilar world of Anjum’s guesthouse with that of the contemporary Indian society which has become intolerant of the *Hijras*, Dalits, Muslims, Christians and Kashmiris because of their social, ethnic, gender and religious association, we see that Anjum’s Jannat Guesthouse is hovering over the borders between the dead and undead has accommodated people “outside . . . a hierarchical grid of caste, religion and all that” (Dasti).

Similarly, the image of the mall from the novel is another striking public space that holds spectral features. While for Saddam it represents the site where his father was murdered because of his communal association and work, it also represents what Tilo believes to be “*the whole world’s mazar*” (Roy, *Utmost* 412; italics in original), a shrine built in someone’s memory. Even though the mall’s grandeur induces awe, it becomes an elegy to the Dalit community. This is because it holds the memory of communal insensitivity and victimisation that Saddam had to bear in particular and the Dalit community had to endure in general in general at the hands of the upper caste Hindus throughout history. Since the mall stands at the margins between the old and the new: the old land/new building, the old history/new outlook, etc., it is seen as an “out of joint” (Derrida 81) landmark erected in concrete, a manifestation of the past injustice against the socially marginalised that exists as the ghost of the past in the present. Hence, by portraying Saddam’s personal narrative as the dark underbelly of India’s modernisation, Roy reminds the readers that the spectral nature of history lingers and will keep haunting us unless we engage with it.

In addition to Saddam, Roy has portrayed Kashmir, the “beautiful, war-torn valley” (116) as another spectral space in her selected work. Personifying it as “a single pair of lungs, swelling like a throat with the urgent, keening cry” (Roy, *Utmost* 180), Roy comments on Kashmir’s lost beauty, the people and the occupation that have become a part of Kashmiri generations for decades. She makes innumerable references to the changes in the Kashmiri landscape that its people have witnessed over the years such as “the Kashmiri flycatcher which was threatened then, and must surely by now be extinct” (Roy, *Utmost* 167).¹¹ She mentions the village of one of the security guards who had moved to Delhi to

¹¹The Kashmiri flycatcher is a type of bird that has become a rare sight in Kashmir.

find a job which “still existed” in his dreams and not “at the bottom of a dam reservoir” (Roy, *Utmost* 113). She depicts the image of blood on the snow and bodies covered in shrouds at various places in the novel and the occupation which made the “graveyards . . . as common as the multi-storey parking lots that were springing up in the burgeoning cities in the plains”; she foregrounds the fact that due to shortage of space, some “graves became double-deckered, like the buses in Srinagar that once ferried tourists between Lal Chowk and the Boulevard” (Roy, *Utmost* 319). These traces of places and lives erased haunt the pages of the novel as newer urban landscapes, images, and stories of human struggles due to the occupation are embossed on the Kashmiri socio-political narrative. Through these references, Roy not only highlights the plight of the Kashmiri people who are currently under a curfew imposed on them by the BJP government, she also laments the resilience of these people and this place whose hopes and fight for freedom remain undeterred. As days turn into decades and the future of Kashmir remains mired in uncertainty, Roy wonders “even if momentarily, what the hell were we doing in Kashmir, governing a people who hated us so viscerally” (Roy, *Utmost* 181), resorting to the common belief that in Kashmir’s case “nobody was blamed . . . It was Kashmir’s fault” which is why “life went on. Death went on. The war went on” (Roy, *Utmost* 324) in this region. Kashmir, like King Hamlet, in itself is a specter, a space crying for justice in an unjust world.

To conclude, the above reading suggests that the various spectral entities and characters in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* learn to negotiate with their social environment as they endeavor to live with their old and new histories. From exploring spectral characters like Anjum, Tilo, Musa and Saddam who occupy liminal positions in their society, to analysing spectral spaces and spectral landscapes which play a prominent role in Roy’s novel, this paper argues that Roy not only critiques her socio-political fabric, but also awakens within her characters and her readers a yearning for a better future in modern-day India where people of different denominations would be able to live in harmony. By positing the marginal space in itself as a site for forging unities across differences, Roy’s novel offers a timely insight into how the world can benefit from the inclusive praxes of the socially excluded. Despite not being didactic, the novel projects the specter of a positive world, thereby opening up the space to answer the ever-haunting question, “Whither?” (Derrida xix) for contemporary India.

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