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Spatial Improvisation And Resistance Of Hijras In The Sub-Continent: Mapping Third Space In The Ministry Of Utmost Happiness

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Abstract

The hijras or the Third gender by birth faces social exclusion, and discrimination in the sub-continent. They are the most marginalized of all in the region. This research probes into spatial dynamics of their marginalization and attempts to trace their subsequent spatial improvisation and resistance in The Ministry of Utmost Happiness. Next an effort[1] will be made to see how the subcontinent societies mirror the same dilemma and then relate it to hijra empowerment and struggle. Edward Soja's Third space theory is used as a lens both for textual analysis of selected passages from the novel and to review some of the reported items about the hijras in social and print media across the sub-continent. The main findings of the study are the creative and adaptive use of space(s) by the hijras to foster communal support sites to activism, retaliation and advocacy of equal rights. Further research may be carried out on the impact of cultural relativism and universal human rights, representation in digital literature, a critique of initiatives for their meaningful social inclusion and policy reforms at the government level.

Keywords: *spaces, improvisation, resistance, innovation, adaptability.*

Introduction

The concept of space and spatiality has evolved from fixed, objective, inanimate backdrop or setting to a more dynamic, relational socio-cultural construct. Hence theorists from disciplines like Geography to Humanities and Social Sciences have discussed it. Plato calls the space 'chora' – an invisible and formless receptacle for all things that shapes our understanding of reality (Mendell, 1987). Aristotle calls place topos: boundary of the containing body (ALGRA, 1995) whereas Augustine (1944) explores the 'interior' or imaginary conceptualization of spaces (Bennington, 2017). Other theorists mention spatial relationships between ideas/concepts (Dahlstedt, 2012), Straus (1965) discusses human spatiality and contends that not only we live in spaces but we live through spaces: all our experiences and actions are situated in spaces. We see and hear, walk and talk, interact and act in spaces. Spatiality plays a crucial role in shaping our identities, interactions, and understanding of the world around us (Kirby, 1996). For the hijras however the relationship between space and identity is particularly complex. Born with the biological condition of non-conformity to typical male or female classifications, they often face stigma, marginalization, and erasure. This marginalization is

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perpetuated not only through social norms but also through the very spaces they inhabit (Kitchin, 1998).

Spatial improvisation represents fluidity of space that allows its innovative and creative use in socio-cultural context to assert identities (Amit & Knowles, 2017). The modern multidisciplinary studies no longer define space as an inanimate physical entity but deem it as an experience in which socio-cultural values and roles are refined and adapted(Kolb, 2008). In other words, spatial improvisation in this study refers to how the hijras in the subcontinent adopt, adapt and make adept use of their socio-cultural spaces in response to their lived experiences and needs.

Resistance, in the context of this study, stands for an array of strategies that the hijras employ to challenge their marginalization (Alamgir, 2022). From activism and advocacy to community building and artistic expression to social media presence , are the multifarious modes of resistance that hijras seem to make use of in order to fight out stigma and discrimination against them (Sequeira, 2022) . The focus of this study is to trace how Anjum and other hijras in the subcontinent socio-cultural context use spatial improvisation as a form of resistance and aims to understand the complex inter-relationship between space, identity, and power.

Spatial improvisation may be considered as a mode of resistance for the marginalized segments of society. The hijras are apparently the most marginalized of all in the said society that they are almost treated as sub-humans (Alamgir, 2022). They make use of spatial improvisation within the peripheral and delimited spaces available to them by creating alternate communal spaces hijra gharans and fostering support community networks in physical as well as spiritual space in order to resist social exclusion. Thus they tend to subvert the oppressive binary gendered cultural narrative /structures by various means (Verma, Sharad, Singh, & Bharti, 2023). Over the years, their social inclusion through ritualistic badhai/ blessing for the newly-wed or the newborn is also an improvisation to resist exclusion (Hossain, 2012) . They enter spaces that are otherwise closed for them. Likewise their vibrant presence in virtual space/social media platforms has voiced their unheard stance which has enabled them to win acknowledgment as third gender constitutionally throughout the sub-continent (Dey, 2019) . It may be perceived that through improvisation of their delimited spaces, they challenge and disrupt the existing power structures that otherwise thwart them to peripheral spaces (Hall, 2005) .

Edward Soja's Third Space Theory may be used as a theoretical framework to understand the spatial experiences and resistance strategies of the sub-continent hijras (Chen, Orum, & Paulsen, 2018) . It suggests that spaces are not only lived through phenomenon and become part of human experience, but are inherently political and social (Benyon, 2022) . By applying this theory to the experiences of hijras, This study aims to highlight how space may be used as a tool of marginalization and resistance for the subcontinent hijra community. The relationship between spatial improvisation and resistance in Soja's Third Space theory highlights how marginalized groups like hijras can create alternative environments (hijra gharanas) to foster communal/support networks that enable them to survive through precarious living pattern infested with poverty and disease. It seems to be a replication of conventional family values of the mainstream bi-gendered society for the non-binary individuals. These spaces simultaneously serve as sites for resistance as the very bodies of hijras are the sites of oppression.

Arundhati Roy's novel, The Ministry of Utmost Happiness, offers an insightful exploration of the subcontinent hijra experience through a hijra protagonist, Anjum who subverts normative exclusion/marginalization through spatial improvisation. She redefines her identity as a unique

individual by creating Jannat Guesthouse, a haven not just for the outcaste hijras but for the socially excluded by defying all the normative constructs of difference and exclusion (Douglas, 2012). This novel offers a unique spatial frame through which one may examine the interplay between spatiality, identity, and resistance. The sub-continent hijra community offers a compelling parallel to the experiences depicted in The Ministry of Utmost Happiness reflecting their real-life dilemma and problems. Despite facing similar challenges and marginalization, the community has made significant progress in recent years, making use of virtual space through attractive content on social media platforms. This improvisation is self-evident from entertainment content/attention grabbers to social activism – serving as a mouthpiece to air their concerns and mobilization to resist oppression as a community to winning constitutional legal status as third gender.

Through a close reading of selected passages from The Ministry of Utmost Happiness and a parallel review of the life of the sub-continent hijra community, this research aims to contribute to an understanding of their occupied spaces through their lived experiences and the ways in which spatial improvisation and resistance can be used to challenge binary-gendered societal norms in order to assert their unique identity. By examining the complex relationships between space, identity, and power, this study hopes to shed light on the ways in which the hijra can reclaim space and assert their identity in the face of severe marginalization.

Research Objectives

The main objective of this study is to explore the spatial dynamics of hijras in the sub-continent and to trace their spatial improvisation and resistance strategies to fight off marginalization and social exclusion. The research objectives are twofold: One to trace instances of spatial improvisation in the novel, The Ministry of Utmost Happiness with the main focus on Anjum's character and spaces. The study attempts to trace her mobility and trajectory seeking alternative spaces in order to assert her identity as a hijra. Two, the study attempts to juxtapose Anjum's struggles and assertions in the novel with the real-life spatial improvisation, resistance and mobilization of the hijra community in the sub-continent. By achieving these objectives, this research aims to contribute to a enhance understanding of spatiality of hijra experience in the region, highlighting the ways in which spatial improvisation and resistance intersect to empower them and enable them to challenge dominant norms and spaces.

Research Questions

1. In what ways Anjum's spatial improvisation in The Ministry of Utmost Happiness portrays the spatial experiences of the subcontinent hijras?

2. How the novel's depictions of Anjum's socio-spatial resistance resonate with the contemporary struggles and assertions of the hijra community in the subcontinent?

These research questions aim to explore the ways in which The Ministry of Utmost Happiness represents spatial improvisation and resistance of hijras, and how these literary portrayals connect to their real-life experiences and struggles in the subcontinent.

Literature Review

The subcontinent Anglophone literature on the subcontinent hijra mostly revolves around anthropological investigations concerning their lives, experiences, customs and rituals to enact family life in a hijra gharana (Snigdha, 2021). The next major strand of literature revolves around their stigmatized gender identity and social exclusion: discrimination or discomfort for being non-binary gender that eventually forces them to quit education/training, limited employment opportunities (with begging or sex work as key choices) (Mal, 2015) . The literature establishes their frugal economic life, denial of health facilities, no citizenship rights,

insecurity, material poverty and the like (Sam & Vishnu, 2021) . The hijra suffer from high levels of stigma, discrimination and marginalization (Al-Mamun et al., 2022) . The hijra individuals in the subcontinent face significant challenges in their daily lives, including discrimination, violence, and marginalization (Hossain, 2020) . Spatial improvisation and resistance are essential strategies that they use to navigate these challenges and create their own spaces of identity and belonging (Spang, 2022) . This literature review aims to synthesize the existing research on spatial improvisation and resistance on the subcontinent hijras,

Research has shown that the hijra individuals in the subcontinent face significant spatial challenges, including marginalization and exclusion from mainstream society (Mal, 2018) . Their body is a site of abjection, simultaneously desired and repulsed (Jayaprakash, 2022). This abjection is reflected in the spatial dynamics of the novel, where hijra individuals are often marginalized and excluded from mainstream society (Safa, 2016) . They occupy peripheral spaces like Khawabgah/hijra gharanas and usually the neighborhood objects to their presence around in the locality. The hijras socio-spatial dynamics show that they are pushed to a delimited and peripheral space yet still they try to make the most out of it. For example, Anjum, the hijra protagonist in The Ministry of Utmost Happiness improvises her socio-spatial dynamics to challenge traditional gender norms. Her life-long mobility and search for a homely place with breathing space to be her real self ends up in a graveyard where ironically she lives along with the dead. She creates her own space of identity and belonging in Jannat Guesthouse (Tabbassum, 2019) .

The marginalization and sub-human treatment of the hijras in the subcontinent have subsequently led to the development of strategies of spatial improvisation and resistance that challenges traditional gender norms and attempts to create their own spaces of identity and belonging. As for instance, in Pakistan they have created their own third spaces such as the Khwajasira community, which provides a sense of belonging and identity to its members (Alamgir, 2022). Memoir writing has also been used as a form of resistance, sharing stories and challenging dominant narratives in print and digital literature (DE OLIVEIRA & CORRÊA, 2018) . The hijra have used various forms of resistance including activism and art to challenge dominant narratives and create their own spaces of identity and belonging (Sequeira, 2022) .

Edward Soja's Third Space theory is used as a framework to explore the spatiality of hijra experiences. His concept of third space refers to an alternative counter space for non-binary individuals who are otherwise an outcaste in strictly gendered society. This third space is inclusive and offers transformative environment that emerge in response to traditional binary thinking. Its experiential nature reveals their social standing (Soja, 2008b). By applying Soja's theory to Anjum's story and by tracing real-life hijra resistance across the subcontinent, this study aims to trace their improvisation and resistance in the face of spatial marginalization.

Despite that spatial improvisation and resistance in hijra experiences seems to be a common practice, the existing research revolves around soci0-cultural and historic practices.Previous studies have analyzed the spatial dynamics of hijra individuals in literature and real life (Ashraf, Shafi, & Ahmad, 2023) (Hossain, 2018) but there is a need for an interdisciplinary study that connects the socio-spatial improvisation and resistance strategies of hijra individuals in the subcontinent with their representation in literature. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the improvisation and resistance of the hijra in the subcontinent through the lens of Soja's third space theory.

Spatial improvisation and resistance are essential strategies that the subcontinent hijra employ in their battle for survival. The Ministry of Utmost Happiness offers a powerful representation

of these strategies, highlighting the importance of spatial dynamics and abjection in hijra experiences. By applying Soja's Third Space theory to Anjum's story and real-life incidents of hijra resistance in subcontinent, this spatial literary study aims to trace their improvisation and resistance in the face of spatial marginalization.

Research Methodology

This is a socio-literary study traces reflection of the real-life pattern and experiences of hijras in the subcontinent society especially spatial improvisation and resistance and its depiction in Arundhati Roy's novel, The Ministry of Utmost Happiness. Being a socio- literary study, the text of the novel shall be analyzed along with a review of spatial improvisation and resistance in the real lives of the subcontinent hijras as reported in various studies and print/social media. Therefore the study is in twofold: one to trace spatial dynamics of Anjum, the hijra protagonist of the novel along with a review of sub-continent hijras under the lens of Edward Soja's Third space theory in an attempt to understand how such individuals negotiate with their spatial environments. Hijra resistance as reported in newspapers, social/print media will be analyzed to identify patterns and themes related to spatial improvisation and resistance. By applying Edward Soja's Third Space theory to the text and reported incidents, this study aims to understand how hijra individuals create alternative, inclusive, and transformative environments that challenge traditional binary thinking. The data presented shall be analyzed thematically highlighting the common patterns of spatial improvisation and resistance in the novel and reported data.

Theoretical Framework:

This study is based on Edward Soja's Third Space theory, which enables us to study the experiential nature of space. Space, according to Soja is physical, notional and experiential that decides socio-cultural standing of an individual. Space/place was earlier taken to be a dead, inanimate backdrop of social events/life: this theory enables us to study the complex and multi-dimensional nature of space and its relationship to identity, power, and resistance. Edward Soja's collection of essays Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and other real-and-imagined Places (1996) contends that human geographies have the same scope and critical significance as the historical and social dimensions of our lives. His Third Space theory incorporates the idea of spatial improvisation, emphasizing the dynamic and fluid nature of space as it relates to identity, agency, and social relations of individuals (Maier, 2013). He calls spatiality 'third existential dimension' (p.3) of human life besides temporality/history and sociality. He expounds on trialectics of space transcending the simplistic/antagonistic dualities of modernist age– which enhances our understanding of complex and dynamic nature of human life. The individuals are social actors who navigate and reshape their environments in the light of their lived experiences. Soja further demarcates the physical space as the First space, the conceived/imagined one as the Second Space and the experienced space as the Third space while elaborating on the trialectics of space. The physical space includes the concrete, brick-and-mortar buildings, the purpose/idea or rationale behind their construction will be the conceived or second space. Thus the posh areas and the slums are designed with purpose behind each.

Soja's contributions to understanding spatiality, resistance and the dynamics of third spaces in contemporary society are phenomenal (Soja, 2008b) . He challenges the dualistic view of space and introduces trialectics of space (the physical, mental and lived dimensions of space) in Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places (1996). His Third Space theory states that space is not just a physical location, but a social and cultural construct that is shaped by historical, political, and economic forces (Soja, 1980). He defines Third space as 'another way of understanding and acting to change the spatiality of human life, a distinct

mode of critical spatial awareness that is appropriate to the new scope and significance being brought about in the rebalanced trialectics of spatiality–historicality–sociality.'(1996).

An earlier work Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory (1989) establishes spatiality as a social phenomenon by drawing on Henri Lefebvre's concept of the spatial triad – perceived, conceived and lived space and Michel Foucault's idea: how spaces can serve as sites of power and resistance wherein social relations are inscribed and contested and where existing power structures may be subverted. He states thatsuch a space is dynamic in nature 'real and imagined, actual and virtual locus of structured individuality and collective experience'.

Soja later articulates a vision of space as a dynamic and contested terrain, essential for understanding social justice and community identity in his article 'Seeking Spatial Justice' (2010).

Furthermore, the study brings forth the role of power and resistance in shaping our spatial experiences, as highlighted by Soja (2008). Space is simultaneously a site of struggle and resistance, where different individuals and groups/communities struggle for their spatiality. This shifts the focus to space and power dynamics that shape and define our identity. The marginalized on the peripheral spaces of society resist and fight for space through improvisation and resistance..

The spatial experiences are diverse and dynamic in the social context as argued by Soja (2008) and define an individual's social standing. They house human experiences and mirror socio-cultural normative pattern. Moreover spaces are never pure or fixed, but fluid and ambivalent that enable us to see the complex and conflicting nature of human experiences (Soja, 2008b) . The third space theory brings out space as a complex and dynamic element of human experience (Soja, 2008a).

Discussion & Analysis
I

Soja's Third Space theory allows us to analyze space as a complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon which is directly related to identity, power, and resistance (Kühne & Berr, 2022) . This section offers a contextualized analysis of spatial improvisation and resistance of the hijras in the subcontinent by drawing a thematic comparison of its depiction in the novel. Space is emblematic of socio-cultural place of an individual in any society and Soja highlights the importance of spatiality in shaping human identities and experiences in his Third space theory. Space determines our social identities (Soja, 1989) .

Hijra are the male bodied feminine individuals (Hossain, 2020) , who navigate and create spaces that subvert and challenge binary-gendered societal norms in the sub-continent. Soja's Third Space theory enables us to analyze the spatial dynamics of the hijras – who are the most marginalized - almost dehumanized group in the subcontinent (Ashraf et al., 2023). They are not given their basic human rights like education, employment, right to vote, medical care, tenancy for lodgings and the like (Alizai, Doneys, & Doane, 2017). The experiential element of Soja's Third space allows us to investigate how they negotiate and challenge traditional norms to assert their unique identity.

SPATIAL IMPROVISATION
The interplay of space and identity is always dynamic and complex. The hijra crave for space but they are denied any (Menon, 2013) . They suffer from identity crisis for being gender fluid

(Chanana, 2011). Mostly discriminatory and gravely disrespectful terms are used in the subcontinent. The most common one in the subcontinent is hijra which has derogatory connotations implying weakness or impotence in men. The term Khusra in Punjabi, Aravani in Tamil, Mangalamukhi in Kannada, Khadro in Sindhi, Pavaiyaa in Gujrati, Hizddem/hizdo in Konkani, whereas hijra/Khusra or Khusaraa in Bengali all connote stigma and shame (Hossain, 2020). All these terms are considered highly insulting when used for heterosexual menfolk in order to demean them (Lal, 1999) .

Historically speaking, they were acknowledged as third gender and the term Khawaja Sira denotes a respectful identity (F. A. Khan, 2014) . They enjoyed prestigious position in the courts of Muslim dynasties. For being delinked with desire, they had an access to zanankhana/women's quarters as well as the main court. They served as loyal and trustee guards of the royal households. Their services were sought at inns/serais to serve the caravans/travellers (Ghosh, 2018) .

Sexually speaking, they believe they have 'a woman's soul' trapped inside a male body hence they prefer female pronouns for themselves and are attracted to men i.e. they consider themselves to be heterosexual (Arya, 2016) . Roy truly depicts their attire: a chunri (loose long scarf worn around the neck) in vibrant hues and flashy clothes adorn them (Anuar & Asl, 2021). It seems as if they wish to be noticed within the space.

Hijras face severe harassment, abuse, and discrimination in public and private institutions, including hospitals, places of worship, and police stations (Ashraf et al., 2023) . They are subjected to hostile treatment, humiliation, and exploitation, leading to feelings of vulnerability and insecurity (Arya, 2016) . Excluded from religious services and denied decent burials, Hijras are forced into limited employment options like sex work, dancing, and begging, where they face severe exploitation and humiliation (S. I. Khan et al., 2009). With limited career spans and no opportunities for advancement, Hijras are susceptible to income shocks and financially precarious lives, often leading to abject poverty and robbery at the hands of police, further exacerbating their marginalization (Mount, 2017) .

The hijras in the sub-continent improvise this delimited space by fostering a support/community network through hijra gharana – erecting a parallel structure of the heterosexual/normative family unit (Goel, 2016) . The guru-chela system facilitates them to develop skills like improvisation, adaptability and resilience. It is here under the mentorship of their guru, they learn to adapt themselves to the social context by employing the cultural authority of being blessed which allows them to step into a severely discriminatory social landscape of the sub-continent (Kalra, 2012) . Its reflection may be seen in the Khawbgah as a Third Space.

The Khawbgah as a Third Space

Roy depicts a hijra-gharana, the haveli called the "Khwabgah—the House of Dreams" in the novel. (Roy 19). Home as a living space is by default binary-gendered and Anjum feels left out and isolated in her home (p.7). Perched on the balcony of her family home, she seems to be a silent, non-participatory actor in the drama of life around her. It is not only her desolation but an inner urge to be herself, to assert her real gender that she mainly decides to join a traditional hijra gharana so as to be her own self. She becomes sick and tired of the adopted male appearance/ a misfit guise that she has to put up to be in society. Finally she is embraced as a person who she really is in Khawabgah i.e. as a hijra. Roy records it soulfully "Finally the day dawned when … he entered that ordinary broken-down home as though he were walking through the gates of Paradise" (Roy, 20). Though the place is unkempt and in dilapidated condition, yet it seemed like a heaven to Anjum. However this place has its own norms. Herein

the gender non-conformity is the norm hence Roy states "At the age of fifteen, only a few hundred yards from where his family has lived for centuries, Aftab stepped through an ordinary doorway into another universe" (Roy, 25). It is certainly an empowering space for Anjum for it is here that she asserts her real identity and self. The outer urban space is gendered in every respect and Anjum has always met with this confusing dilemma 'She (Anjum) who never knew … which queue to stand in, which public toilet to enter .... augmented by her ambiguity" (Roy, 122) is finally at ease here. Roy reiterates the gendered nature of spaces by commenting that even Delhi city is deemed as a thousand-year old sorceress" (Roy, 96).

Inside Khawbgah Roy observes that the hijras occupy the rooms whereas the only female occupant lives in the kitchen as if the socio-spatial norms of mainstream society are subverted here. The normative gendered person withdraws into a peripheral place whereas the third gender occupies the main rooms/lodging space.

Khawabgah is a closed space too, its codes are strictly guarded and outsiders are not allowed. Hence the place is shrouded in mysteries for the outside world.

Kulsoom Bi is guruma /head of this household and she looks after the well-being of the hijras in every respect from food, shelter to mentoring and teaching ulti/Farsi chant. Interestingly Kulsoom Bi does not forget to endorse the past glory of the household. "This house, this household, has an unbroken history that is as old as this broken city, these peeling walls, this leaking roof, this sunny courtyard—all this was once beautiful ... We are not just any hijras from any place. We are the hijras of Shajahanabad" (Roy 48–49). This too is reflective of a gradual socio-cultural decline in their status throughout the subcontinent which shall be discussed later.

Khawbgah as a third place is accommodative to the hijras like Anjum whose ambiguous gender could not find any place in the binary-gendered world outside which Kulsoom Bi calls Duniya. Kulsoom Bi explains the genesis of the name of the house: "The Khwabgah was called Khwabgah... because it was where special people, blessed people, came out with their dreams that could not be realized in the Duniya. In the Khwabgah, Holy Souls trapped in the wrong bodies were liberated" (Roy, 53). Hence as third space, it acknowledges the real identity and self of hiras. The hijra gharanas in the subcontinent have peculiar ethnographic practices. There are conventions to be followed ritualistically. A member of a gharana is bound and under oath to stay there. However, she may leave for another gharana only after payment of dand (penalty) and consent to be adopted by another guru (TC, 2019) . This is reflected in the novel as Anjum sets up Jannat Guest house in a local graveyard and declares that it is open to all who wish to be on their own. It defies all types of sanctions, ceremonies and restrictions even that of a hijra gharana. It accommodates all the unwanted and the social outcastes/dropouts without any reservations.

The Jannat Guesthouse is situated at a liminal place: a periphery or border area between the live and the dead. Interestingly Roy depicts rooms wherein the alive lay down for a restful night beside the dead ones. It may be taken as a third space in Bhabha's sense wherein boundaries between the alive and the dead, prestigious and the indigene, the wealthy and the impoverished melt away to create room for the unwanted/marginalized. It opens up to hitherto unchartered routes. Hence Anjum erects a comfort place to the un-solaced and the unheard ones and welcomes them with open arms.

Hijras often experience a tumultuous childhood, raised by their own families as male children but are usually subjected to physical, emotional, and verbal abuse to conform to traditional gender norms. As a result, many hijras flee their homes during adolescence, seeking refuge in

Hijra communities like that of Khawabgah in the novel, where they find acceptance and mentorship. Here, they embrace their true identity as a third gender, shedding the constraints of societal expectations. Through ritualistic exchange of chunri, a hijra formally enters the communal household under the care of guru.

Roy aptly depicts Anjum scouting for homely spaces/homes. Homelessness and non-availability of shelter is one of the basic issues that the hijras face in the subcontinent. With scant/frugal resources the guru/mentor offers modest food and lodgings to hijra but that too comes with a price. They forsake their liberty and independence. It is a tough battle for survival that they have to fight – poverty is usually accompanied with sickness and disease. Sadly the impoverished hijras in the sub-continent end up in renting out ghettos or tents. Socio-spatially they face hostile attitude from the residents in their neighborhood to the extent that their houses are either burnt or robbed (Majeedullah, 2016) . Spatially speaking, they are pushed to peripheral places. Financial support from immediate family like share in the property, inheritance and other resources are denied to the hijras in the subcontinent (Sultana, 2016). Roy describes Khawabgah in dilapidated condition. One of the rooms has its roof caved in, plaster is chipped off all over the place. Roy notes that through this communal space, the hijra create alternate spaces to support each other in the face of severe marginalization and stigmatization. It bespeaks of their spatial improvisation which is a multi-faceted approach to creatively adapt and make use of the available spaces. They not only extend support and companionship to each other but employ innovative socio-cultural adaptation to alter their spatial dynamics. As for instance Badhai, dance performances at weddings allow them to enter into the socio-cultural spaces that are otherwise closed for them (Roy, 2015) . They enter households, carry the baby in their arms and bless the child while dancing. For the newly-weds, they are culturally considered to bring in fertility. In this way they transform their social exclusion into an inclusive space by fostering community bonds with the mainstream society (Ali) . Their participation in rituals and weddings is considered as a good omen in the subcontinent. This exemplifies their unique social reality of finding inclusion in the face of exclusion. They redefine and navigate their identity in the fluidity of third space.

In other words, they adapt, refine and redefine their roles with in the sub- continental socio-cultural context to improvise or adapt the space available to them. They navigate through marginalization by carving a unique social identity in an otherwise hostile environment. They spread joy and spell blessing for those who treat them almost as a sub-human.

Many studies on hijras in the subcontinent reveal that they suffer from HIV and other diseases. Usually medical care at Government hospitals is not extended to them. Instead of any sympathetic treatment, they are usually scoffed at and chased away from the medical units (Rao, 2017). The hijra patients are not accommodated in the public hospitals and other healthcare units. Their ID cards in the subcontinent is a recent phenomenon: only recently 3rd gender has been legally acknowledged through constitutional reforms. It must be kept in mind that the hijra have no choice and are socio-spatially cornered to the extent that basic healthcare facilities are denied to them for being a sexual minority.

Public places hospitals, schools, toilets have no provision for the hijra. Many a times the hijra patients pass away in miserable condition as doctors and admin staff are indecisive about the ward. This again has improvised at least on paper as now ID cards have x or 3rd gender along with the conventional male and female column. There are schools across the subcontinent for the hijra children where such children are educated in a healthy conducive and inclusive environment.

The hijra have improvised on this as well by being witty and clever. The easily available and affordable android mobile phones enabled them to use social media platforms from loose talk to witty entertainers. Thus their muted voices were heard like never before, their stance was listened to by larger audience than ever before. This has given rise to trans-activism and the voice for the 3rd gender gained momentum and thrust.

Cross-dressing as an Improvisation Gimmick:

Their distinct attire and wide-fingered clap may be considered as their trademark. It may be interpreted as a conscious move towards real self-identification as third gender in the Third space. They try to embody 'both/and' or inclusive aspect of third space – a space where opposites or contradictions coexist to forge new distinct identity. It is a common observation in the sub-continent that they are dressed up in shocking pinks, reds, blues or any shiny dark colored clothes with a dupatta/scarf round their necks. Usually they wear bright shiny shades in make up as if to make up for their insipid and bland real lives (Mazumdar, 2016) . Being gender-fluid, the disparity shows up every now and then. They are ridiculed in the outer/social circle and punished in the inner circle within their homes. Roy describes this phenomenon when Anjum joins music classes Young Aftab is completely oblivious of her gender disparity then. She grows up like an ordinary child. It is when he is sent to a Madrassa to learn Quran or later to music class that his peers taunt at him for being different and the other. His natural demeanor and voice was feminine which became the butt of joke amongst his batch-mates. . "He's a She. He's not a He or a She. He's a He and a She. She-He, He-She Hee! Hee! Hee!"(Roy,12). Usually parents and siblings adopt stern attitude to correct them whereas they are born to be like that – distinctly different –an odd amongst the conventional binary gendered commoners. Hence they do not fit into the well-defined spatial patterns of society and hence scouts out alternative dwelling places away from the mainstream society.

The hijras show mobility and migratory trajectory in the sub-continent. As a beginning point, it may be said that there is some inner urge, some discomfort from within that makes them undertake flight from home. They usually elope from homes as they often receive beatings at home so as to act and behave properly like a boy. Their parents and siblings forget that they are she-males/hijras and not proper males. Physique-wise, they grow tall and muscular like men but there are tell-tale signs of their gender non-conformity. Hence, when they behave differently, they are severely reprimanded. Psychologically speaking, they have an inclination towards feminine attire. This phenomenon of a female soul within a male body is termed as gender dysphoria (Berlin, 2016).

Roy meticulously records the details of gender dysphoria and attraction for bright attire. "One spring morning, Aftab saw a tall, slim-hipped woman wearing bright lipstick, gold high heels and a shiny, green satin salwar kameez" (Roy, 18). This bold and beautiful woman acts like a temptress for her who lures Aftab to a new home amidstt her likes. "He followed her down the street all the way to Turkman Gate and stood for a long time outside the blue doorway she disappeared into" (Roy, 18). The socio-spatial dynamics of this unwomanly woman are made clear by the writer. "Ordinary women in Shajahanabad wore burqas or at least covered their heads and every other part of their body except their hands and feet. The woman Aftab followed could dress as she was dressed and walk the way she did only because she wasn't a woman. Whatever she was, Aftab wanted to be her" (Roy, 18–19).

Seeking space Through Their Whetted Wits:

Their witty verbal dialogue in the roundabouts, stage performances or social media clips is also an improvisation during which they speak in a convincing way by winning arguments, insulting and defending themselves. They live by their cunning wit and smart play (Mazumdar, 2016) .

The lived experiences of the hijra reveal that they live precarious lives. Most of them are early drop-outs from primary schools due to jeering and taunting by their class fellows. They become the butt of joke to evoke laughter. As mentioned earlier that whenever a male does not act or behave in a manly manner, they are insultingly called a hijra. The exclusionary hostile environment does not allow them to be educated or skilled. Hence they are left on their wits to earn bread as mostly they do not receive any financial assistance from their immediate families or any share in the inheritance (Jebin & Farhana, 2015). They are left with no choice but to beg or indulge in flesh business. Their feminine nature makes them sexually attractive to men. The sex work invites not only HIV but further deepens the stigma around them. Their economic marginalization aggravates their impoverished state and they are condemned to live a lifetime battle of their survival.

As artists they are considered inferior to female dance performers as they have to work under an agent/manager (Arya, 2016) . They are bound like slaves to work only for that particular agent and have to share a portion of their earning with the manager. Even this workplace which is otherwise quite acceptable for female artists is potentially hostile and adverse for hijra artists. One they are almost made slaves by their agents as if found having performed for someone else, they have to pay the price dearly. Usually at the end of the performance, they are dragged and physically assaulted by the male audience. This physical abuse is pretty common and dangerous yet the hijra artist gives performances which speak volumes of their impoverished economy. They have at max 12-15 year work-span to perform as an artist from the age of 14 till 28 during which they try to make the most out of it. They are at war against discrimination, violence and exclusion in the third space provided by the NGOs and other welfare organizations. It was a good policy of the government of Pakistan (East Pakistan as Bangladesh then) that it gave sustenance allowance to the aged hijras till 1980s (F. A. Khan, 2014) . However, unfortunately later this policy got discontinued for some unknown reason.

Violence and Harassment

The hijra are subjected to violence and abuse particularly from the law enforcement agencies and the general public. Roy offers yet another pertinent observation/incident in the novel. Before taking a night-stroll with her fellow, Nimmo "Anjum had dressed down, in one of her drabber Pathan suits, though she could not resist a hairclip, a dupatta and a touch of lipstick"(Roy, 108). Roy mentions that Anjum prefers to be in small crowds – late night stroll is not safe for a transgender. It is her fear of molestation that makes her cautious and walk amidst a small crowd. Reportedly the reason behind the aggressive mob-attacks on police stations in Pakistan was molestation, harassment and snatching money by Police officers from the hijras at night time (The News International, May 5, 2024). Ironically they face security issues from the custodians of peace and safety in Pakistan. It is not an isolated incident. The recent wake of retaliation incidents by the hijra community against the reportedly insolent behavior of policemen in Pakistan seems to be a brazen response to their maltreatment and ostracization. Videos and pictures went viral on internet and social media showing several the hijras attacking Mingora Police Station (reported on GNN News 25 January, 2020) the Chakiwara Police Station, Lyari, Karachi (27th February. 2024), Kharian incident (May 5th, 2024), Khanewal incident (May 2024) reported in Aaj English TV (May 11th, 2024). In almost all the reported incidents, the cops are accused of robbing and de-robing the transgender which sparked the violent reaction and it was the more noticeable this time as it went viral on social media. It did not have to go through the filter of mainstream media which suggests that despite of denial of physical space in the real world (wherein they are pushed to peripheries), the digital/virtual space seems to accommodate this ostracized/sidelined community. Their catchy content on Insta, TikTok, Facebook and Youtube testifies their spatial improvisation.

They live a life of fear and insecurity as legally and politically they are disempowered. Recently this has been countered by the mobilization of hijra community wherein tens and scores of them gathered outside police stations and mobbed them in protest.

Resilient Behaviour

The tem hijra is used for 'a special group of people born with missing or ambiguous genitals delinked from desire' (Hossain, 2017) . They have long been culturally recognized as 3rd gender in the sub-continent however their legal recognition as 3rd gender could only be materialized in the sub-continent in the last decade. They are considered to have spiritual power to bless or curse the newly wed and the newly born – however hijragiri is learnt under a guru or a senior hijra. A disciple hijra or chela learns Hijragiri which signifies the ritual conduct of badhai (confer blessings upon the newborn after holding it in arms and dance), cholla (the collection of birit) and mastering the ulti or Persian chant (secret language since they served in the royal courts). Culturally speaking, the term hijra is used derogatively for men behaving or acting unlike normative masculine pattern. The very mention of somebody as a hijra in daily life context incites humor and evokes laughter. Spatially speaking, they are usually found residing to be in the slums or working-class neighborhood at the most. Generally the middle class and posh localities are beyond their access: they usually cannot afford to live here financially and even if they have money, the residents do not permit them to rent a house there. They occupy slums and enjoy support from their neighborhood. It is their lower-class status, together with its associated imageries of filth, foul smell, cheap and gaudy makeup and aggressiveness, through which hijra are discursively produced as the abjected others in middle-class imaginary.

The new visibility of hijra as rights bearing citizens

Since the last two decades, the NGOs mainly working to curtail HIV internationally among the wider community of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people included the hijra and some researchers or representatives of civil society. It is very clear that unlike the hijra who have always been culturally prominent, politically assertive and spatially visible, the other groups like the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender had no public visibility and voice. The focus of these hijra- centred NGOs is allegedly to promote non-heteronormative sexuality which is contrary to the religious and cultural norms of the subcontinent. Thus the hijra are exploited by the NGOs and the government both. Spatially, socially and economically their situation has not been changed: they are still residing in slums, with no employment policy in place and with no signs of social improvement in status or respect. The key differentiating factor is the element of no choice in case of Hijra whereas the LGBT exercise their sexual preference.

Spatial Dynamics According to Religions of the Subcontinent

Islam and Hinduism are the two major religions of the sub-continent. The novel The Ministry of Utmost Happiness depicts Anjum as a Muslim. However it is interesting to investigate spatial dynamics of hijras with reference to major religions i.e. Hinduism and Islam. The hijra culture in Hinduism centres around the worship of Bedhraj Mata – mother goddess – in which they renounce their sexual desires for which they are rewarded with blessedness/or the power to bless. This has remained their primary role in the Indian society. However with the passage of time, a decline in this religious cum cultural practice has been witnessed resulting in their economic downfall. The decline in the ritualistic belief of boon-giving power of hijras made them indulge in flesh trade for survival.

The Muslim history too has explicit references of Khawajasira serving at prestigious positions in the royal court. They being enunch/intersex had an access to the interior/family quarters of the Muslim emperors of Mughals, Tughlaqs and other dynasties. Many a travellers like Zwilling have noted with fascination of their role as die-hard loyal confidante of the king and chambermaid of the queen. Their masculine physique qualified them as guardians and did not

fall under Islamic gender segregation in the social sphere. They rose to prominence owing to their loyalty, trustworthiness and witty nature. Spatially speaking, they had free access to all domains. There are literary references of hijras serving 'slaves of love'/their masters fulfilling homosexual desires in the pre-colonial subcontinent. This trope evidently confirms the hijra slavery but unlike plantation slavery, their slavery was a silent pact for fulfilling same-sex desire. The 18th century British colonialism in the subcontinent criminalized and stigmatized hijras by enforcing gender binaries through Acts.

As colonized nation, the subcontinent witnessed gradual decline in the social status of hijras. They were persecuted for propagating unnatural propensities and they were criminalized and pushed to peripheries. The Criminal Tribes Act (Act 27) of 1871 promulgated 'registration, surveillance and control of certain tribes and enunches'. Section 377 of Indian Penal Code declared hijra dressing as offensive í.e. 'appear, dressed or ornamented like a woman, in a public street or place, or in any other place, with the intention of being seen from a public street or place' , or (c) "dance or play music, or take part in any public exhibition, in a public street or place or for hire in a private house" as offence. They were to remain under surveillance for the suspicion of kidnapping or castrating children. Thus the British associated hijras with inborn propensity of crime or vagrancy which led to their ostracized position and peripheral place.

II

Resistance

Edward Soja's concept of Thirdspace serves as a framework for understanding resistance of the hijra in the sub-continent. Thirdspace surpasses traditional binaries by integrating physical, conceptual and lived experiences of space. The hijra community shows resistance spatially through various strategies like subverting socio-cultural narrative, intersecting with other identities, activism and advocacy and the like.

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness offers a powerful exploration of the socio-spatial experiences of the hijras in the subcontinent, resonating deeply with the contemporary struggles and assertions of the hijra community in the subcontinent. Through Anjum's story, Roy challenges readers to rethink their understanding of gender and space, highlighting the need for inclusive spaces that accommodate gender fluidity. She makes her readers sensitive that how the rigid binaries make the lives of non-conforming individuals a hell. As discussed above, Anjum's journey highlights the significance of alternative spaces that accommodate gender fluidity, challenging traditional gender norms and shedding light on their ongoing struggles for their rights in the region. They have faced marginalization and violence, leading to a recent surge in mobilization and resistance. Trans-activism and advocacy has brought a shift in the books of law, the social acceptance and inclusive spaces are yet to happen in the subcontinent.

Roy points out that after spending two decades at Khawabgah, Anjum decides to set up her own home JannatGuesthouse in a local cemetery. It is again a communal place like Khawabgah which may be deemed as subversive and expansive in Soja's terms. It is a haven for the outcastes of the society. Foucault describes it as a heterotopia: "The cemetery is certainly a place unlike ordinary cultural spaces" (Foucault, 2008) . It sort of overarches and connects all the families to this one place. Hence Anjum decides to move in here as a place that defies normative structure. It is a liminal space that has limitless potential of budding in any way, in any direction whatsoever. Usually homeless people or addicts live in the graveyards in the sub-continent. Surprisingly it turns out to be a safe place for her: "In that setting, Anjum would ordinarily have been in some danger. But her desolation protected her. Unleashed at last from social protocol, it rose around her in all its majesty—a fort, with ramparts, turrets, hidden

dungeons and walls that hummed like an approaching mob" (Roy, 61). It is a homely space for the expelled and the outcastes of Duniya whether transgender or rebels. Thus Anjum's "Jannat Guest House became a hub for Hijras who for one reason or another, had fallen out of, or been expelled from, the tightly administered grid of Hijra gharanas" (Roy, 68). It is here that Anjum adopts Zainab as a child which completes her as a woman which in Soja's idea of third space becomes the place of self-fulfillment and completion too. Roy's description of this haven is pretty disturbing. Apparently, it is a liminal place where the dead and the live come together, living people lying with the dead in the Guesthouse. It is tragic that the transgender are pushed so far even in their peripheral space that they join the dead while alive.

The novel opens with the description of Anjum living in the graveyardlike a tree. Her unique personality is is reinforced. "It doesn't matter. I'm all of them. I'm Romi and Juli, I'm Laila and Majnu. And Mujna, why not? Who says my name is Anjum? I'm not Anjum, I'm Anjuman. I'm a mehfil, I'm a gathering. Of everybody and nobody, of everything and nothing. Is there anyone else you would like to invite? Everyone's invited" (Roy, 2). The novel begins and ends up in the graveyard – a liminal space in Bhabha's terms. It is a space which has to be lived and experienced, a step beyond the conventional sociality and temporality associated with it. The graveyard strikes the readers as a peripheral space which resonates the unkempt, poverty-ridden ghettoized places where the transgender are usually pushed to live all over the sub-continent.

Their chants of gender equity, equal citizenship, respect and other basic human rights like shelter, protection, education and employment echoed through the virtual space more forcefully.

It seems not out of place to mention here that the improvisation of the virtual third space has given the transgender a podium to raise their voice and project their concerns. Interestingly the whole South Asian region has witnessed a shift: they are legally accepted as third gender. The show of defiance and dissidence by transgender against the cops, the law enforcement officers by society reflects that not much has changed on ground.

However their improvisation in spatial dimension of the virtual space/social media seems to offer a viable virtual third space to air their agony and trauma. The injustices and violence against them is not a new occurrence but their resistance and improvised use of social media as community protest might be held as the latest resistance mode too. One may say that improvisation and resistance is a sort of re-orientation strategy to create order out of disorder in the delimited or peripheral space by the transgender community. Roy clearly incorporates the idea resistance to break the status quo of gender binarism in her novel.

The hijra resistance has won them legal battle. The NALSA judgment (2014) by Supreme Court of India, Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill (2016) in India and in Bangladesh (2013) officially recognize transgender/hijras as third gender in India, the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act (2018) in Pakistan happen to fall in the last decade i.e. 2014-2024.

The community has made use of virtual space to raise their voices and project their concerns which has sparked debate in the parliament houses of the sub-continent and judiciary. This improvisation has won them a legal status of third gender. Thus they have been able to potentially subvert gender binarism in the subcontinent society. This resistance and defiance of social norms is reflected in Anjum's story, as she navigates the challenges of gender non-conformity and finds solace in alternative spaces.

The novel draws attention towards the contention between self-expression and societal expectations from the hijras. They are usually raised as male children as Anjum was Aftab in

her childhood. The classmates made her realize of being different from the rest by pointing out their feminine voice and odd behavior. Anjum fled from her parents' home to Khawabgah in search of inclusive spaces that may accommodate gender fluidity. Anjum's story demonstrates how the hijras/marginalized individuals seek strength and support from each other in communal spaces that is a site of shared experiences. The subcontinent hijras have mostly lived as community over the course of centuries. Their recent mobilization on social media/or social activism in the virtual space platforms has won them recognition as third gender.

The hijra community that occupies peripheral spaces in the physical world has built pressure and resistance in the virtual space. Anjum's story serves as a powerful testament to the resilience and strength of the marginalized people in the subcontinent winning them more visibility and attention. While this active presence on social media may be deemed as progress (which has materialized in legal recognition) however no significant change was noticed in their physical surroundings and space. Unfortunately the real-life problems of hijras in the physical space are still the same with no significant improvement or change. It is important to note that legal recognition does not necessarily translate to social acceptance or protection. Roy's portrayal of Anjum's experiences serves as a powerful critique of societal norms and expectations, highlighting the need for greater understanding, acceptance, and inclusivity of hijras in the subcontinent. The novel testifies to the resilience and resistance of hijras as a community. Within the hijra gharana they support and empower each other. Their defiance of societal norms, their assertion of real identity or their true self and their resistance to binary gendered norms call for an inclusive and accommodating space. Roy depicts that Anjum improvises the graveyard into an all-inclusive space in defiance to rigid boundaries of the Indian society outside. Likewise the virtual space has provided a platform where the hijras have caught attention of the masses through entertainment to podcasts and other modalities. They have been able to galvanize and support each other well. They demand social recognition, acceptance and their due place in society where they are treated as equal citizens.

Conclusion

This research paper has related textual depiction of the dilemma and struggle for space of hijras in Arundhati Roy's novel The Ministry of Utmost Happiness to those in the subcontinent. The main focus lies on spatial improvisation and resistance and how it resonates with the contemporary struggles and assertions of the hijra community in the subcontinent. The analysis revealed that the novel offers a powerful exploration of the socio-spatial experiences of the subcontinent hijras, reflecting the contemporary struggles and claim for space. The novel portrays the resilience and strength of the hijras, the most marginalized of all communities and demonstrates the ways in which they may find empowerment and support in shared experiences of communal spaces. The delimited physical space has been improvised through communal spaces and in real life in addition to the communal spaces; the virtual space has enabled them to capture attention. The masses lent an ear to their problems and concerns – the unspakable dilemma of being disowned by their families and society. There seems to be no space for the hijras in the binary gendered grid of society. The novel's depiction of Anjum's resistance and her assertion of individual identity through a space Jannat guesthouse is an attempt to subvert the normative socio-cultural pattern of her society. The hijra community in the subcontinent have recently mobilized against marginalization and violence. They retaliate against inhuman treatment and fight for their rights. The virtual space has lately provided a platform for this marginalized community to raise their voices and project their concerns. They have captured attention through entertainment (mostly lewd/vulgar content) to social activism: they have improvised the virtual space to represent their plight and sorrowful situation. This enabled them to lead forums and media campaigns specifically addressing their spatial issues – that the sub-continent societies are not accommodative to the third gender by birth individuals. They are

stigmatized, loathed and disowned. Education and employment – doors to a decent living remain permanently closed for them.

The findings of this research paper highlight the importance of literary representation in reflecting and shaping societal attitudes towards marginalized communities especially of the hijras. The novel represents the dilemma of Anjum, her spatial experiences offer a powerful critique of societal norms and expectations and urges for greater understanding, acceptance, and inclusivity.

Further research is needed to explore the ways in which literature both print and digital can be used as a tool for social change, particularly in the context of the most marginalized communities of all, the hijras. Moreover, the findings of this research paper reiterate the need for greater understanding of the experiences of hijra individuals in the subcontinent.

Policymakers and stakeholders should work towards creating inclusive spaces that may accommodate these gender variant individuals by birth. This may be achieved through the development of policies and programs that may promote greater understanding, acceptance, and inclusivity of the marginalized communities like the hijras. Their improvisation of virtual space has drawn attention towards their dilemma that has sparked debate and conversation in the parliament house and judiciary ushering change at least in their legal status. Now they can have their ID cards and passports against their real gender identity. The hijra community should keep up the struggle for acceptance and recognition.

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