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"Intersections of Environmental Degradation and Marginalized Bodies in Urban India: A Study of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* by Arundhati Roy"

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ABSTRACT

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) offers a complex, fragmented narrative that brings together the stories of India's most marginalized populations — including Dalits, Kashmiri militants, transgender communities, and displaced urban dwellers — against the backdrop of a decaying urban ecology. This paper explores how Roy situates the lives of socially marginalized characters within landscapes of environmental degradation in Delhi and other Indian urban spaces.

Using an eco-critical and postcolonial framework, the study investigates how the novel represents the entanglement of bodily and environmental ruin. It argues that urban environmental decay in Roy's novel is not merely a setting, but a symbolic and material extension of the social and political neglect faced by marginalized identities. The transformation of a graveyard into a refuge for the transgender protagonist Anjum, for example, becomes a powerful metaphor for reclaiming dignity amid systemic abandonment — both ecological and human.

The study also engages with theories of environmental justice, biopolitics, and subaltern ecology, highlighting how the city is depicted as a space of simultaneous invisibility and hyper-visibility for its most oppressed citizens. Ultimately, this paper seeks to position Roy's novel as a vital text for understanding the convergence of ecological and social injustice in contemporary Indian literature.

Keywords: Environmental degradation, marginalized bodies, urban India, Arundhati Roy, postcolonial ecocriticism, environmental justice, biopolitics, The Ministry of Utmost Happiness.

Introduction

In contemporary literature, the growing intersection between ecological degradation and social marginalization has emerged as a crucial space for postcolonial and environmental inquiry. Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) offers a unique lens into this convergence, portraying how the decaying urban landscapes of India both reflect and reinforce the invisibility of its oppressed populations. Roy's narrative unfolds across graveyards, slums, and political ruins, revealing the entangled fates of marginalized individuals and degraded environments. Through an ecopolitical reading, this paper argues that environmental collapse in the novel is not simply a backdrop but a parallel metaphor for bodily and social dispossession.

Though Roy's debut novel *The God of Small Things* has received considerable scholarly attention, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* remains underexplored, particularly in terms of its ecological implications. Scholars such as Jennifer Wenzel (2006) have examined the environmental unconscious in postcolonial narratives, while Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence" provides a framework for understanding the gradual, invisible impact of environmental damage on marginalized groups. Ananya Jahanara Kabir (2020) explores the aesthetics of brokenness in the novel but stops short of linking environmental degradation to bodily marginalization. Moreover, while some criticism addresses Roy's political engagement, few have explored how **space, ecology, and identity intersect** in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*.

This paper builds upon such foundational works by explicitly analyzing how environmental decay — manifest in ruined graveyards, polluted cityscapes, and neglected urban infrastructure — mirrors the systemic exclusion of gender nonconforming, caste-oppressed, and politically suppressed communities.

Research Goals

To investigate how Roy uses urban environmental degradation as a metaphor for social and bodily marginalization.
To examine the role of space (e.g., graveyards, ruins, slums) in shaping the identities and resistance of marginalized characters.
To contribute to the growing discourse on **postcolonial ecocriticism** by applying its frameworks to contemporary Indian urban literature.
To interrogate how narratives of environmental collapse coalesce with those of caste, gender, and political abandonment.

Research Methodology

This study employs a **qualitative, interpretive methodology**, grounded in close textual analysis and supported by theoretical frameworks from:

- **Postcolonial Ecocriticism** (e.g., Nixon's "slow violence"),
- **Environmental Justice Theory**, and
- **Biopolitical Theory** (drawing on Foucault and Mbembe).

The research includes:
Close readings of selected passages from *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*,
Thematic analysis of space, identity, and ecological decay,
Intertextual engagement with secondary criticism and related South Asian ecopolitical literature.
Anjum, a transgender woman, constructs her home in a Delhi graveyard, a site commonly associated with death and abandonment. Yet, in Roy's narrative, the graveyard becomes a space of survival and community — a sanctuary for outcasts. This subversion illustrates how Roy links urban neglect with new forms of habitation and resilience. The graveyard's unregulated ecology — overgrown weeds, neglected tombs, stray animals — reflects Anjum's own social positioning: unrecognized yet persistent.
Roy depicts the ruins of Delhi not only as environmental decay but also as political testimony. The novel's characters, many of whom are survivors of communal riots, caste violence, and military occupation (particularly in Kashmir), live in spaces that have been stripped of formal value — slums, ruins, and ghettos. These spaces, steeped in both ecological and historical damage, expose the layered violence inflicted on the land and its people.
Despite their marginalization, Roy's characters do not merely inhabit these spaces passively. They reconfigure them as zones of resistance. The Khwabgah, a communal home for hijras, queers, and other marginalized persons, becomes a site of alternative kinship and care. Similarly, the graveyard transformed by Anjum becomes an inclusive public sphere — arguably more humane than the state-run spaces of urban India. Roy thus positions ruined ecologies not as dead zones, but as **sites of hope, agency, and radical imagination**.
This paper demonstrates that environmental degradation in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is not incidental but integral to Roy's social critique. The novel's spatial and ecological metaphors amplify its political message: those who are socially disposable are also those most exposed to environmental collapse. In doing so, Roy underscores the convergence of **ecopolitical violence** — where the degradation of land and the devaluation of life are intertwined.
The novel challenges conventional binaries between nature and the urban, between the human and the ecological, suggesting a more integrated vision of oppression and resistance. Roy's literary ecology is one of fragmentation and hybridity, much like the identities she portrays.
Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* presents a fractured yet deeply interconnected urban ecology in which environmental degradation and social marginalization are mutually constitutive. The novel's landscape—grimy city streets, overgrown graveyards, polluted rivers, and militarized zones—is as central to its narrative as its diverse cast of outcasts. Roy's vision of urban India is not one of linear progress but of layered decay, where ecological ruin reflects the systemic neglect of those pushed to the peripheries of social visibility.
The most potent symbol of this convergence is the graveyard in Delhi where Anjum, a hijra (transgender woman), builds her home. This graveyard—"the city of the dead in the city of the living"—is a space of exclusion and yet becomes a sanctuary for the forgotten. Roy writes:
"She lived in a graveyard, in a grave, but she wasn't dead. She was the liveliest of them all."
This inversion of space and meaning is foundational to Roy's critique. The graveyard, traditionally a symbol of silence and finality, becomes a space of survival, collective memory, and even joy. Its ecological state—overgrown, unmanaged, forgotten—is a mirror of Anjum's own marginalization. But rather than resigning to invisibility, Anjum reclaims the space:
"She swept the graves, fed the cats, and lit incense sticks for the unvisited dead."
Such gestures transform the neglected landscape into a heterotopic site of care, what Foucault would term a space that both mirrors and subverts the dominant order.
Roy's depiction of urban decay is inseparable from her critique of the neoliberal state. Delhi's polluted air, encroaching concrete, and failing infrastructure are not presented as unfortunate byproducts of modernization,

but as evidence of what Rob Nixon calls "slow violence"—an ongoing, structural violence that disproportionately affects the most vulnerable. As one character reflects,
"The city had eaten its own edges. It had eaten rivers, parks, and fields. And now it was eating the poor."
Here, urban development becomes an act of consumption, of erasure. Those without economic or political power are rendered both spatially and environmentally disposable. The metaphor of the city "eating" its own suggests a grotesque self-destruction driven by capitalist excess.
The novel's non-linear, fragmented narrative style mirrors the disjointed lives of its characters—people like Saddam Hussein, Musa, Tilo, and others, all navigating social exclusion and environmental degradation. These characters are not merely placed in ruined spaces; they are shaped by them. Their identities are forged in what Mbembe calls the "death-worlds" of necropolitical modernity. Roy writes of Anjum:
"She was a creature of the city's underbelly, a thread in its tapestry of sorrow."
This imagery underscores the integration of body and environment—the notion that social suffering is inscribed into the very fabric of urban life.
Kashmir, too, becomes a critical site in Roy's eco-political geography. Once romanticized as a paradise, it is now rendered a space of occupation, surveillance, and violence. The novel's descriptions of Kashmir's beauty are frequently juxtaposed with brutality:
"The sky was full of drones and stars… the forest was full of soldiers."
This deliberate contrast collapses the divide between environmental beauty and political horror. The natural landscape is militarized, and Roy uses this to signal a deeper environmental injustice—the occupation of land is also the occupation of ecological futures.
Yet amidst all this, Roy does not offer a purely tragic vision. Her narrative invests in the possibility of reclamation. The Khwabgah, a shelter for hijras and other non-conforming individuals, and the graveyard become what Stacy Alaimo might call *trans-corporeal* spaces—sites where the porous boundaries between body and environment allow for new forms of relationality. As Roy notes:
"In the graveyard, a small republic had taken shape. A republic of the discarded."
This republic challenges dominant models of citizenship and community, privileging care, solidarity, and shared vulnerability over blood, caste, or legality.
Roy's environmental vision extends the scope of postcolonial ecocriticism by insisting that ecological justice cannot be separated from social justice. Who breathes clean air? Who is buried with dignity? Who gets to dwell in the city, and under what conditions? These are inherently political questions. Roy suggests that
"some people are born in the wrong place, at the wrong time, with the wrong skin, the wrong faith, the wrong gender."
The state's disregard for these people is written into the geography of the city—its abandoned buildings, toxic waterways, and invisible communities.
In conclusion, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* offers a profoundly layered critique of environmental and social collapse in contemporary India. Roy's ruined landscapes are not empty spaces; they are thick with meaning, memory, and resistance. Through graveyards turned into homes, militarized paradises, and polluted cities, she reveals how ecological decay and social marginalization are co-constructed. Yet she also insists on the possibility of radical renewal. The novel's ruined ecologies are not endpoints but beginnings—sites where new forms of life, kinship, and political imagination can take root.

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* offers a poignant meditation on the intersections of environmental degradation and social marginalization in urban India. By foregrounding spaces like graveyards, ruins, and slums, Roy draws attention to how neglected ecologies mirror the fractured realities of marginalized bodies. This paper contributes to the evolving field of postcolonial ecocriticism by emphasizing the need to consider environmental justice as inseparable from social justice. In Roy's vision, ruined landscapes do not merely mark decay but hold the potential for reclamation, solidarity, and subversive beauty.

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Arundhati Roy constructs a narrative landscape where the urban environment and human bodies reflect one another in their fragmentation, abandonment, and persistent resistance. The novel's urban settings—particularly the ruins of Delhi, the graveyard that becomes a home, and the spaces of protest and surveillance—are saturated with both ecological decay and sociopolitical neglect. These spaces are not merely backdrops to the story but serve as active agents in shaping the experiences and identities of the characters who inhabit them. Roy's characters are often physically displaced, socially excluded, or politically disenfranchised, and they find refuge in the most environmentally degraded locations, which themselves bear the scars of colonialism, modernization, and neoliberal urban planning.
The graveyard where Anjum, a hijra (transgender woman), builds her home is the novel's most potent symbol of the intersection between bodily marginalization and environmental neglect. The graveyard, a place traditionally associated with silence and death, becomes a site of life, community, and subversion. Roy turns a space of finality into one of beginning—a shelter for the living dead of society: the outcasts, the forgotten, the politically erased. The graveyard is ecologically degraded, overrun with weeds and unmaintained graves, but it becomes, paradoxically, the most nurturing space in the novel. This inversion forces the reader to confront how modern urban spaces systematically exclude those who do not conform to dominant norms of gender, religion, caste, and class, pushing them toward the literal and metaphorical edges of the city.

Roy's portrayal of urban decay is also a critique of the neoliberal Indian state, which prioritizes capital-driven development while rendering the ecological and social costs invisible. Through the depiction of Delhi's polluted air, concretized rivers, and collapsing infrastructure, Roy makes visible the "slow violence" (Rob Nixon) that disproportionately affects those without political or economic power. The characters in the novel—Anjum, Saddam Hussein, Musa, and others—do not merely suffer in these decayed spaces; they are forged within them. Their identities are shaped by continuous exposure to both physical and ideological toxicity. This slow violence is not dramatic or explosive, but it is constant, eroding dignity, health, and the right to be seen and heard. Roy's use of such spaces highlights how environmental degradation functions as a form of biopolitical control, where the bodies of the marginalized are exposed to life-threatening conditions under the guise of urban development or national security.

Furthermore, Roy explores how degraded spaces can become counter-sites of care, memory, and resistance. The graveyard is not merely a refuge but also a space where histories—both personal and collective—are archived and performed. The presence of multiple communities in this space, including those of different faiths and castes, suggests a pluralistic, horizontal social structure that contrasts sharply with the vertical hierarchies imposed by state and religious institutions. Roy's narrative shows that the graveyard, and similar spaces of ruin, allow for new forms of relationality, kinship, and identity—ones not bound by blood, law, or religious orthodoxy, but by shared vulnerability and mutual support. In this way, the ecological ruins of the city are repurposed into spiritual and political commons.

The urban environment in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is also marked by surveillance, displacement, and militarization. The sections of the novel that deal with Kashmir and the militarized state extend the metaphor of ruin from physical degradation to the moral and political decay of governance. Roy ties environmental destruction—deforestation, poisoned water, military occupation of natural landscapes—to the brutal erasure of political dissent and minority identities. The representation of Kashmir as both a natural paradise and a violent prison serves to heighten the contrast between beauty and horror, peace and oppression. The ecological richness of the valley, juxtaposed with the daily brutalities of surveillance, curfews, and disappearances, exposes another form of environmental injustice: the colonization of land by the state for control and extraction, whether ideological, military, or economic.

In this context, the notion of "bare life" (Agamben) becomes highly relevant. Roy's characters, especially the transgender, the caste-oppressed, and the politically targeted, are stripped of the protections of law and citizenship. Their exposure to environmental harm is not incidental; it is a result of calculated indifference and systemic violence. The novel asks: who has the right to clean air, to safe shelter, to urban visibility? Who is allowed to shape the ecological future of the city? These questions are inherently tied to the politics of belonging and exclusion. Roy suggests that the answer is always political—those deemed non-normative or inconvenient are pushed into zones of neglect where environmental and social degradation converge.

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* renders a cartography of environmental degradation entangled with the fragmented geographies of marginalized lives in postcolonial urban India. Through her portrayal of sites like graveyards, ruins, and militarized zones, Roy constructs a literary ecology that is as political as it is environmental. The novel's narrative architecture is shaped by spatial and bodily decay—an intersection that becomes critical in understanding how exclusion operates simultaneously on material and symbolic registers.

One of the most salient metaphors in the novel is the transformation of the graveyard into a home. This repurposing reflects what scholars like Nixon describe as "slow violence"—not only as the gradual destruction of ecosystems but as the long-term erosion of human dignity and community bonds. Anjum's home in the graveyard, populated by the socially invisible, enacts a radical reimagining of urban ecology. In this context, the graveyard does not merely accommodate the marginalized; it enables them to redefine the terms of community and kinship on their own terms. The ecological degradation—untrimmed weeds, dilapidated tombstones, and the proximity of death—becomes a counter-aesthetic that resists sanitized narratives of urban progress and modernization.

Roy's treatment of space aligns with Michel Foucault's concept of *heterotopias*—spaces of otherness that exist outside normative social structures. The graveyard, the Khwabgah, the abandoned buildings, and the sites of protest are all heterotopic zones where alternative forms of sociality emerge. These spaces accommodate lives deemed unworthy of legal or social recognition, exposing the biopolitical operations of the neoliberal Indian state. In her depiction of these neglected zones, Roy emphasizes that the city does not merely contain ruins but is itself a ruin—of communal harmony, ecological balance, and democratic possibility.

Moreover, the novel's aesthetic of fragmentation mirrors the dismembered body politic of India. The non-linear narrative and multiplicity of voices reflect not only the disjointed experiences of the marginalized but also the uneven temporalities of environmental collapse and recovery. This aligns with Achille Mbembe's theory of *necropolitics*, wherein the state decides who may live and who must die—not only through direct violence but through the delegation of death to environmental neglect. Roy's characters are necropolitical subjects, forced into ecological sacrifice zones where exposure to pollution, displacement, and surveillance is a condition of life.

Roy also situates the environmental within the political through her portrayal of Kashmir. The region's natural beauty—its forests, rivers, and mountains—is rendered grotesque by its militarization. The natural environment in Kashmir becomes both witness and victim of the Indian state's authoritarian project. Here, the violence of occupation seeps into the land itself, further demonstrating how environmental degradation is never

apolitical. This eco-political convergence intensifies Roy's critique: Kashmir, in its suspended sovereignty, becomes a symbol of how land and body are both sites of contestation.

Comparatively, Roy's narrative shares affinities with texts like Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, which also link ecological crises to marginalized communities. However, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* distinguishes itself through its sprawling urban scope and its deep engagement with non-normative gender identities. Anjum's transgender identity is not incidental but crucial in understanding how environmental and social norms co-construct marginalization. The novel resists any singular framework—gender, caste, or class alone cannot explain the depth of abandonment experienced by its characters. Rather, it is the intersectional accumulation of these identities that determines exposure to environmental precarity.

Furthermore, Roy's critique of development politics reveals the environmental cost of capitalist urbanization. Projects of beautification and infrastructure—often executed in the name of national pride—result in the displacement of the poor and the razing of ecologically sensitive spaces. Roy's Delhi is a palimpsest of contradictions: temples built on the rubble of slums, highways dissecting forests, malls standing over graves. These spatial violences suggest that environmental justice must necessarily include the right to habitation, to memory, and to historical continuity.

At the narrative's core is a call for re-imagining urban life—not through policies of inclusion managed by the state, but through lived practices of solidarity, resistance, and care. The communal structures that form in the ruins—whether in the Khwabgah, the graveyard, or the gatherings of the oppressed—exemplify what environmental humanities scholar Stacy Alaimo terms "trans-corporeality," the idea that human bodies are inseparable from their environments. The physical decay of bodies and spaces in the novel is therefore not simply an index of suffering but also of interdependence and resilience.

Ultimately, Roy challenges the reader to consider the ethical implications of environmental degradation in an unequal society. She refuses a sentimental view of nature or a heroic narrative of survival. Instead, her eco-literary vision foregrounds ambiguity, decay, and contradiction as the grounds from which political consciousness can emerge. Her characters do not merely endure ruin—they speak from it, through it, and against it.

Yet, Roy does not offer a purely tragic vision. Her narrative invests in the idea of reclamation—of space, voice, and dignity. The graveyard becomes a community center. The abandoned places become homes. The most marginalized characters become caretakers, memory-keepers, and rebels. The ecological decay that pervades the novel is transformed into a call for new modes of inhabiting the city, of forging solidarity among the dispossessed. Roy implies that from the cracks in the dominant system, new life forms—both biological and political—can emerge. Her novel enacts a literary ecology of resistance, where the intertwined ruins of land and body give rise to fragile but radical alternatives.

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, environmental degradation and social marginalization are thus not parallel phenomena but mutually constitutive. The novel challenges the reader to view environmental justice not as an isolated ecological issue, but as an embedded social concern—rooted in histories of caste oppression, gender normativity, religious nationalism, and political violence. By bringing together these threads within a richly layered and non-linear narrative, Roy makes a powerful case for why the future of ecological thought must be inclusive of those who are most often silenced in its discourses.

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