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Where Old Birds Go to Die: Spaces of Precarity in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

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Abstract: This article connects recent work on precarity and postcolonial theory, focusing on Arundhati Roy's representation of spaces of precarity in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. I read *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* as an attempt at mapping the neoliberal state and possibilities of resistance that escape its frameworks of surveillance. The novel complicates claims that precarity in post-colonies is a recent occurrence ushered in by the liberalization of their economies in the late 1980s. It does this by tracing the genealogy of earlier forms of precarity through the histories of its characters, specifically that of its protagonist, Anjum, a Hijra. Such histories offer ways of understanding not only marginal constituents of a seemingly all-encompassing neoliberal order but also local traditions of spatial organization used to resist neoliberal incursions. These traditions converge in the novel in the space of a graveyard, where Anjum provides other characters temporary refuge and a model of dissidence that defies conventional parameters of spatial organization legible to the state. The novel posits such illegibility of resistance as an antidote to cooption by the neoliberal state, mirroring the taxonomic resistance that the Hijra offers to the heteronormative nation state.

Keywords: precarity, spatial traditions, neoliberal states, heteronormativity, *Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

What king or potentate is Rumpelstiltskin? Powerful, pitiless and armed to the teeth. He's the kind of king the world has

> never known before. His realm is raw capital, his conquests emerging markets, his prayers profits, his borders limitless, his weapons nuclear. To even try and imagine him, to hold the whole of him in your field of vision, is to situate yourself at the very edge of sanity, to offer yourself up for ridicule.
>
> Arundhati Roy, *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* 145

At first glance, Arundhati Roy's allusion to Rumpelstiltskin in the above passage seems to merely point out the difficulty in understanding the challenges to democratic sovereignty posed by capital, "the kind of king the world has never known before." After all, the eponymous Rumpelstiltskin in the Brothers Grimm tale tricks a miller's daughter-turned-queen into agreeing to part with her firstborn child, thereby surrendering her parental authority, unless she is able to identify his name. Much like the miller's daughter who is made miserable by the inability to correctly identify her tormentor, those exploited by contemporary capitalism find their inability to locate and imagine capital a prime cause for their condition and an important obstacle to formulating resistance. However, the key argument Roy makes here concerns not merely the various elusive apparatuses of capital but also its manipulation of space to create or expand pre-existing spaces of precarity. It is not only Rumpelstiltskin himself but also his "realms" and "borders" that require identification, suggesting the profoundly spatial character of late capitalist operations. Roy claims that this requires a critical imagination to enlarge its "field of vision," an act that would bring those making the attempt to "the very edge of sanity." The seeming impossibility of conceptualizing and resisting global capitalism does not constitute a cynical acknowledgement of the futility of political action but a need to move beyond the available models of conceptualization and resistance. Roy's writing from the 2000's, a decade characterized by the rapid spread of late capitalism into Third-World spaces, seeks to locate specific historical moments within a larger totality of global capitalism. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, published in 2017, looks at the form global capitalism has assumed in these spaces and indicates Roy's desire to posit the

spatial limits of global capital—in a period when its incursions cultivate an assumption of spatial homogeneity.

While this utopian space of the graveyard is located in Delhi, the narrative of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* unfolds in sites across India, suggesting a larger spatial scope than Roy's previous novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997). The episodic narrative begins with the story of Anjum, a Hijra,[1] who lives in a house owned and managed by a community of Hijras that she joins in her adolescence. Considered beautiful, Anjum is able to lead a relatively peaceful life among the community of Hijras and takes up sex work, an occupation that Hijras often engage in.[2] She adopts a girl, whom she finds abandoned near a mosque and names her Zainab, and during her stay with the Hijras, Anjum becomes the face of Orientalist reports by Western journalists. Finding in her a representation of non-binary sexuality they believe to be atypical of Indian society, the journalists encourage Anjum "to talk about the abuse and cruelty her interlocutors assumed she had been subjected to by her conventional Muslim parents, siblings and neighbors" (30). The reporters are disappointed when Anjum refuses to conform to their preconceived notions of the Third World and eventually redesign her story to "suit readers' appetites and expectations" (30). This is an instance of Roy positioning characters in the novel spatially: Anjum's sex and sexuality, modelled on local practices, are shown to form part of larger, global discourses.

Anjum's life changes drastically when she goes on a pilgrimage to the shrine of Wali Dakhani in the Indian state of Gujarat in 2002 and is assaulted during state-sanctioned anti-Muslim riots, a fictionalized version of the riots that broke out in Gujarat in 2002 following unsubstantiated rumors that Muslims had set a train carrying Hindu pilgrims on fire.[3] The traumatic experience leaves Anjum unable to sustain relationships after she returns, even within the community of Hijras, and she leaves them to live in a graveyard, where a former client builds a makeshift house for her. Anjum turns this house first into an inn and later into a funeral home for unwanted and unidentified corpses, naming it the Jannat Guest House (*Jannat* is the Urdu word for "paradise"). The house becomes a refuge for people displaced from the city and houses a floating

population of the homeless and destitute. The novel incorporates the narratives of this group's members, who lead precarious lives as a result of both their specific identities and neoliberal economic structures that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. During a trip to Jantar Mantar, a protest site in New Delhi, some members of this group, along with Anjum, adopt an abandoned child whom they name Udaya Jebeen. They later receive a posthumously delivered letter from the child's mother, a character identified as Comrade Revathy, a member of a group of Maoist rebels agitating against the Indian state. By the end of the novel, the child becomes a metaphor for precarity as a capacious model of inventive and experimental resistance that the members of Jannat engage in.

Pierre Bourdieu was one of the first to employ the concept of precarity; he used it to theorize the difficult working conditions faced by Algerian laborers (Bourdieu qtd. in Barbier 18) and later revised the term to include non-standard work of various kinds (Bourdieu, *Acts of Resistance* 82). In the twenty-first century, precarity has evolved into a useful but contentious category to understand labor in globalized post-Fordist societies. Judith Butler and Simon During see precarity as an ontological condition that does not preclude a differential allocation of vulnerability but still argue that it has conditioned existence across different eras and places, rather than being a characteristic of specific societies in the present.[4] Other theorizations of precarity emphasize its specificity in the post-Fordist neoliberal moment, arguing that precarity results from the retrenchment of the welfare state and the weakening of labor protections, leaving large parts of the labor force with unstable or seasonal employment.[5] In the postcolonial context, these divergent definitions of precarity often overlap, given that the development of capitalism in such contexts has had different trajectories. Vulnerability in the postcolonial context is not always a by-product of neoliberalism even though neoliberal policies have played a significant part in the aggravation of traditional forms of vulnerability. In my analysis of precarious spaces in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, I suggest that various forms of traditional vulnerabilities become visible as their effects become increasingly spectacular. Precarity in the novel is not reduced to a feature of the neoliberal moment but is instead the result of a dialectical progression,

emerging out of the interactions of multiple elements of identity that cannot be understood merely through global economic changes or insecurity inherent in the human condition.[6] Moreover, the visibility of precarity gives rise to the possibility of solidarity. Roy explores the forms that such solidarity takes in the novel through an analysis of space in the neoliberal city, where the convergence of the precariat in the same space makes the recognition of shared precarity possible in an unprecedented manner. While the segregation of urban spaces on the basis of precarity facilitates interactions between the characters, it also raises the important question of difference within the precariat. Roy negotiates this question by mapping an imagined space that houses different constituents of the precariat. I analyze this utopian remapping of an urban space through Maurizio Lazzarato's concept of coordination, a mode of political resistance based on a radical rethinking of the conditions for equality. Lazzarato's model is remarkable in that it does not advocate the dissolution of difference in its quest to achieve solidarity, thus addressing one of the fundamental conflicts in social justice movements—the conflict between identity politics and traditional labor movements. In what follows, I look at Roy's utopian vision of solidarity, based ironically in the space of a graveyard.

I. Space in the Neoliberal City

The neoliberal economic structures instituted in different parts of the Global South following the end of the Cold War have increased class disparities and led to the concentration of wealth in the hands of a select few (Brown et al. 7). The emergence of neoliberalism is attributed in no small part to a reclamation of power by a small class of elites after the 1960s (Harvey, *Brief History* 9). The rise of neoliberalism is well documented (Davies 121; Mirowski 420; Peck and Tickell 383; Steger and Roy 22), from its academic origin in neoliberal theory in the post-war period—specifically in the Mont Pelerin Society founded by the neoclassical economists Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman, among others—to its widespread political currency in the 1980s, with the elections of Margaret Thatcher in 1979 and Ronald Reagan in 1981, thereby becoming the official policy of the American power bloc.

While there are differences in how neoliberalism developed in different parts of the world,[7] the basic features of such economies are the same. Reducing state expenses by withdrawing from social welfare schemes, removing regulations from the movement of capital across state borders, and the privatization of public assets are some of the core values that define neoliberalism (Plehwe 240). Following their implementation in Europe and North America, these policies were forcibly imposed in different parts of the third world through Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) that promised to revive their economies. Over the past three decades, these programs have resulted in widening socioeconomic gaps, an increase in absolute poverty, and a rise in the share of debt as a percentage of GDP for most countries of the Global South where they were implemented (Naiman and Watkins). These programs, apart from signaling a nation's entry into a global market, marked the end of any semblance of hope for a utopian socialist society envisioned during the struggle for independence from the colonial power. In the decades following Indian independence, socialism exerted a powerful force on Indian politics owing to Nehruvian policies similar to those followed in left-leaning South American nations. The liberalization of the Indian economy in 1991 led to the adoption of a capitalist framework, with the state's role as provider of welfare increasingly on the decline.

Roy's novel focuses on this period of neoliberal ascendancy, and the author draws her characters from communities that were vulnerable even prior to its emergence. The narrative decision to focus almost entirely on marginal spaces and characters accomplishes two objectives. Firstly, it helps establish continuities between neoliberalism and its predecessors, showing how neoliberalism is responsible for the exacerbation of pre-existing factors of marginality while also undercutting any nostalgia for an idyllic pre-capitalist postcolonial society. Secondly, it envisions possibilities of collective politics through a recognition of the vulnerabilities facing diverse populations within the same society, suggesting the need for a model of spatial politics that possesses the scope to encompass people with different identities. The graveyard represents such a space, one that allows people with multiple identities not only to

congregate but also to use and organize space in ways that foreground their shared precarity.

Despite her appropriation of public space, which, as mentioned above, she turns into a site for the homeless to congregate, Anjum is allowed to operate Jannat Guest House and live off its profits, an act that violates Indian laws against the conversion of religious spaces for other purposes ("Places of Worship"). The establishment, however, provides services that are valuable to the state, including funerals for people killed illegally by state police and the burial of bodies from which organs were harvested without permission.[8] Jannat's collusion with the state facilitates its autonomous operation and, ironically, helps benefit underprivileged sections in the city. This transformation of the graveyard into a space that provides refuge to the displaced yet offers only temporary residence is symptomatic of the neoliberal state's reduced role, which involves regulating the use of space rather than viewing it as a means of production. This also exemplifies how, as G. Parthasarathy has noted, the state outsources tasks requiring unskilled labor, underpaying members of the unorganized sector who usually engage in such work (1866).[9]

The graveyard in the novel draws the basis of its existence from bodies that form the city's refuse, becoming a place where the management of dead bodies allows the living precariat to eke out a life more dignified than the one available to those bodies when they were alive. The state tacitly supports Anjum's use of public space to manage corpses while allowing her to stay there without legal consequences, thereby taking advantage of a private citizen's entrepreneurship to reduce the spread of diseases in the city and maintaining the potential for tourism that other parts of the city enjoy. This is an example not only of biopower in the twenty-first century but also of the shift from the city's erstwhile urban organization based on a managerial infrastructure, one David Harvey identifies as characteristic of late capitalism ("Managerialism" 16). This transformation of urban space occurs not solely through the state's disinvestment in its people but also through Anjum's manipulation of multiple traditions of spatial organization. Apart from being the state's outsourcee, Jannat also draws on the Islamic tradition of the *wakf*,

a charitable organization that involves the donation of land that may be used for a variety of purposes, ranging from graveyards to travelers' inns (McChesney x). Although the contemporary *wakf* is run as a profitable enterprise and governed by a set of national laws, Jannat taps into an older pre-national conception of this tradition (whether historically accurate or not), forming itself according to the needs of its patrons rather than state laws. The graveyard illustrates a use of space that escapes the purview of the neoliberal state since it refuses to remain faithful to classifiable categories, either old or new, traditional or modern—an indeterminacy that opens up, in Harvey's view, a utopian possibility in the new urban spatial organization. Lying at the interstices of managerial and entrepreneurial states, this indeterminacy allows for multiple traditions to coexist within the graveyard.

Anjum's use of such traditions to provide a space for people with different identities to come together also highlights the need to uncover local possibilities of solidarity and resistance, rejecting what David Featherstone calls a "pervasive tendency to position current forms of transnational political activity as a radical break with past forms of political practice" (8). Basing itself upon a processual conception of spatial resistance, such a manifestation of solidarity would refuse to position itself as the negative other of the neoliberal order. Instead, this solidarity is a complex formation that may be made visible by the neoliberal order, but it is by no means caused exclusively by it. Featherstone stresses the generative possibilities of such solidarity, which is created through dynamic networks of spatial practices he calls "maps of grievance" (5). The recruitment of past practices and institutions such as the *wakf* into a program of resistance to existing modes of spatial organization brings multiple geographies into play, including those foreign to the nation state. The dynamism inherent in such a process enables the graveyard in Roy's novel to evade the modern state's taxonomic impulses.

By escaping categorization, the graveyard in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* offers a site for the unclassifiable within the state. The coalition of the precariat formed by the end of the novel comprises people from various socio-economic locations—Anjum; Tilo, a member of a Malayali[10] family; Miss Udaya Jebeen, an orphan later adopted by

the residents of the graveyard, referred to above; Saddam Hussein, a Dalit;[11] as well as other characters. The representation of this possibility of solidarity between characters of different backgrounds is informed by political movements across the world and by theories of precarity. I argue that one of the most important conflicts within such movements that address precarity and their theorizations is the tension between the politics of coalition or solidarity on the one hand and identity politics on the other. As Kumar et al. point out, this conflict has often been the result of a false binary of class and identity through which the possibilities of solidarity across classes is muted (20). In the Indian context, the socialist possibilities of the sixties and seventies have faded, giving way to Hindu fundamentalism and the legitimation of class competition as an inevitability following the liberalization of the economy.

The absence of solidarity in Western democracies, Kathleen Lynch and Manolis Kalaitzake contend, has often been attributed to an emphasis on calculative relationships based on reciprocity and the difficulty in forming affective relationships based on friendship and community (247). Referring to the West's incomplete variant of solidarity as "parasitical solidarity" (18), Sally Scholz suggests an alternative, which requires a focus on social justice. Scholz claims that such forms of solidarity cannot develop in situations in which the rhetorical expression of solidarity does not carry with it any moral obligations (18). In the Indian context, it may not be possible to neatly distinguish calculative forms of solidarity from those based on community. Communal solidarities in parts of the nation may mirror calculative relationships in their ability to economically benefit members of the community while accomplishing goals defined by the state. As Prerna Singh argues in a fascinating analysis of the effects of solidarity on welfare, provinces that developed such forms of solidarity were able to accomplish more of their developmental goals than those provinces that did not. Focusing on the post-independence formation of states in India based on shared linguistic identities, Singh observes how those Indian states with a clearly defined cultural identity outperformed those whose identities were internally diverse, suggesting the importance of organizing around shared markers of identity (11).[12] However, as Lynch and Kalaitzake point out,

such analyses display an "overriding focus on the state and formal contractual relations between the citizen and the state" (245), avoiding the local forms of solidarity that may develop between marginalized groups within a province. Well-defined provincial identities may help fulfill developmental goals, but the ossification of such cultural identities can reinforce existing hierarchies, further alienating those at the margins.

Hierarchies have existed within political movements because the unequal political and economic positions of their constituents have hindered the possibility of solidarity in the past, presenting an impasse in formulating resistance against neoliberalism. Roy's emphasis on precarity as a condition and a political site provides an entry point to understanding this impasse and suggests a possible method of resisting through affective solidarity among a movement's constituents. Lazzarato suggests that traditional methods of resistance emphasizing participation in trade unions and political parties fail to understand the subjective economy[13] or the processes that go into the creation of the subject in a neoliberal economy. Lazzarato posits "coordination," or the formation of solidarities that presuppose difference rather than uniformity, as a possible form of resistance. Such solidarities, he argues, comprise different groups that form "an unstable, networked, patchwork-loving multiplicity—defying all theoretical definition as well as trade-union or state identification," valuing "a politics of experimentation that lays aside prior knowledge and opens up to the unknown." He argues that this form of resistance bases itself upon "a politics of experimentation that lays aside prior knowledge and opens up to the unknown" ("Political Form").

As such, the rules of representation in a coordinated collective would be different from the rules of representative politics in which unity and uniformity are foundational. Positing the maintenance of difference as a precondition for equality, Lazzarato asserts that coordinated resistance entails a "subjective mutation," or a reevaluation of the processes through which contemporary subjectivities are formed. Such a reassessment entails "an existential affirmation and apprehension of the self, others, and the world" that produces "new languages, new discourses, new knowledge, and a new politics" (*Signs and Machines* 16). Paradoxically, the production of such knowledge can proceed only through a moment of

uncertainty in which this knowledge has not yet been identified through names generated by an existing language: "[t]o produce a new discourse, new knowledge, a new politics, one must traverse an unnamable point, a point of absolute nonnarrative, non-culture, and non-knowledge. Thus the (tautological) absurdity of conceiving production as the production of knowledge by way of knowledge" (18). The production of this kind of knowledge can be accomplished only by rejecting the one-to-one correspondence of an earlier politics in favor of a politics that privileges restructuring, since the congealed identities of the past are the products of a specific subjective economy. In other words, a coordinated resistance involves a set of singular identities caught between the old and the new in a site of flux that offers possibilities for invention. Since coordination occurs at the levels of a collective program *and* differential practices, this kind of resistance sidesteps the risk of identities melting into one another or of forming a norm.

The graveyard in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is the site of this process of restructuring, a space where identities are in a constant state of flux, transforming themselves without settling into newly formed stable identities. This emphasis on the unstable present characterizes various spaces in the novel, from Jannat Guest House to the *shikara* (a kind of boat popular in Jammu and Kashmir) where Tilo is initiated into the Kashmiri freedom struggle to Tilo's apartment, which functions as a satellite for both the residents of Jannat and members of the Kashmiri Freedom Movement. Sites of resistance in the novel attempt to wrench themselves free of institutionalized narratives, not conforming to the state's simulated models of nationalism. Embracing a collective identity in flux circumvents the cooption of the resistance, which is a strategy the state often adopts towards social justice movements in late capitalist societies. Roy introduces this refusal to abide by fixed identities early in the novel when Anjum recalls how an English-educated man (who represents the burgeoning academic interest in Hijras) noted the similarities between her name and Shakespeare's Romeo:

> Long ago a man who knew English told her that her name written backwards (in English) spelled Majnu. In the English

> version of the story of Laila and Majnu, he said, Majnu was called Romeo and Laila was Juliet. She found that hilarious. . . . The next time he saw her, the Man Who Knew English said he'd made a mistake. Her name spelled backwards would be Mujna, which wasn't a name and meant nothing at all. To this she said, "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 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." (8)[14]

This passage calls attention not only to the protagonist's shifting identity and the model of resistance she espouses but also to the space of this resistance. Illegible to the state and the traditional intelligentsia, this space of resistance ceaselessly changes its contours.

The destabilization of earlier models of collectivity also calls into question the existing methods of political organization that Jannat eschews. Paolo Virno argues that the body politic of the contemporary state is constituted by the analytical category of the "people," a Hobbesian unity formed by the centripetal force of modernity, which homogenizes individuals into a singular whole. The resulting effacement of difference leads not to the disappearance of difference altogether but to its relegation to the private sphere. Virno points out that the transnational movement of capital and labor reduces the importance of communities, and from the dissolution of communities emerges the multitude, which is constituted through difference. Unlike "the people," "the multitude" is produced through a centrifugal force and thus no longer moves towards a forced unity (23). The space of this multitude emphasizes difference as a condition for real equality rather than the homogeneity that ensures the privileging of the national elite.

Yet the dissolution of the community and the consequent emergence of the multitude also removes a space of refuge from everyday dangers. Virno draws on the Heideggerian distinction between fear and anguish to explain this space: while fear is a response to known dangers that can be dealt with through dependence on a community, anguish is

existential and frequently dealt with through recourse to religion. In the absence of communal spaces to provide refuge in a precarious society, Jannat functions as a refuge, yet it does not do so on the basis of exclusively traditional relationships. Rather, it provides a model for the multitude, which, as Virno puts it, "might be thought of as the base which authorizes differentiation or which allows for the political-social existence of the many seen as being many" (25). The members of the precariat who converge at Jannat Guest House are lower-caste Hindus, Muslims, and Hijras, communities that have historically not entered into alliances despite similar class positions. The space of the graveyard-as-refuge envisions the formation of a coordinated precariat conscious of the specific histories of its constituents.

The emphasis on these separate histories reveals the novel's commitment to a dialectical view of precarity, which prevents an ahistorical understanding of characters' predicaments whereby they are either the result of a sudden event or a pre-existing function of one's racial, religious, or sexual location. Roy situates these narratives in the larger context of the Indian nation's history, and other prominent strands in the novel feature characters who are a part of the Kashmiri Freedom Movement and the Naxalite movement in parts of Central and Southern India. The presence of marginalized populations in these regions is not accidental, according to Perry Anderson, who points to the Indian state's use of Hindu ideology to manufacture consent in the bourgeoisie. Recent events in Kashmir have only strengthened this thesis as the partial autonomy guaranteed to it during its accession to the Indian nation has been abrogated while Kashmir has been under lockdown.[15] As Roy claims in an article in *The New York Times*, written in response to the repeal of Kashmir's claims to partial autonomy, the mass-marketed marginalization of Kashmiri Muslims accentuates "the architecture of Indian fascism," which consolidates a united Hindu identity ("Silence"). Anderson also observes that the post-independence insurgent movements subjected to the repressive apparatus of the state are the ones that have been organized by non-Hindu communities, causing spaces occupied by them to be marginalized both economically as well as in the national imagination (120). Such systemic marginalization enables the

formation of a manufactured national community of Hinduism, which becomes increasingly significant in a neoliberal economy characterized by the disappearance of communal refuge. The hegemonic Hindu state has thus evolved into a biopolitical agent in tune with neoliberal times, continuing to exert its dominance over non-Hindu sections of the population, as in the case of Kashmir, a Muslim-majority space that has been a site of tension since Indian independence. The novel's exploration of the dialectical development of the nation's margins in post-colonial Indian history calls for examining the formation of national geography itself.

In choosing the graveyard as a site of resistance, the narrative situates itself at once in the present and the past, linking space and time to construct a composite understanding of the city. Roy's novel explores the stories of the graveyard's living residents as well as the people buried there, who were part of another set of spatio-temporal social relations in the city. In treating residents, both living and dead, as important parts of the collective, the novel refrains from conceptualizing precarity as co-terminous with the advent of neoliberalism. On the contrary, it suggests that precarization is intrinsic to the Indian state, ongoing since its inception through what Isabell Lorey terms "the 'differential distribution' of symbolic and material insecurities," which occurs when the "precariousness shared with others is hierarchized and judged, and precarious lives are segmented" (21). Thus, rather than recognizing their shared precarity, the precarious see each other as threats to be neutralized and kept in separate spaces for each one's own continued survival, which, ironically, sustains precarization. As Anderson points out, such segmentation is intrinsic to the Indian state as marginalized communities (who share a non-Hindu identity), victims of precarization themselves, see in each other competitors rather than collaborators.

According to Lorey, the logic of biopolitical immunization, which separates those who are politically immune from those who lead precarious lives, determines which segment is deemed the threat and which the threatened, suggesting that groups occupy different positions within the state's hierarchies. Her contention that precarity is an existential condition that enables one to understand the Other suggests that hierarchies

obscure this precarity that affects all human beings. However, Roy contests this position and argues that precarity cannot be understood merely as a corollary of a Foucauldian governmentality whose power encompasses all equally, turning all people into its subjects. According to Lorey, governmentality does not preclude difference among subjects, allowing for the possibility of "structural inequality" within a society that creates a precariat. However, she views precarization in neoliberal societies as a "normalized political-economic instrument" that differentially affects the populace as a whole (39). Within this model, the possibility of precarization exists even for those who belong to privileged social groups. Roy's novel draws lines of precarity along specific axes of identity, with members of the Hindu upper castes left out of its bounds. While lines of identity are redrawn in the wake of neoliberalism, with changes in the existing relations between characters and the formation of new collectives, the residents of the graveyard (with the notable exception of Tilottama) are still from marginalized communities without clearly mapped-out subject positions.

II. (Re)Queering Neoliberal Spaces

The Jannat Guest House provides a counterpoint to national spaces that are propped up by dominant narratives endorsed by the Indian state. Jannat is produced through a rearrangement of pre-existing spatial relations and creates new ones, resulting in a coordinated space for members of the precariat. The novel does not clearly define the dynamics of this space or offer a model of praxis for it. However, the production of the space itself hints at the possibility of a shift in existing relations through which individuals in the precariat, like Anjum, may acquire visibility. The perspective of a Hijra allows the novel to bypass biopolitical categorizations of the state while offering counter-possibilities of resistance. While there have been attempts (both administrative and academic) to classify Hijras, Hijras' identity, as Vinay Lal has noted, can be understood only as a composite, constituted by a range of ethnic and religious identities (122). While this is true of other groups too, Aniruddha Dutta points out that Hijras present a unique challenge to categorization, as is evidenced by the unsuccessful efforts to do so by Hindu, Jain, and

Orientalist scholars (Dutta 827). The word Hijra stands in for a range of sexual and gender identities as well as patterns of familial organizations that do not conform to the expected patterns of heteronormative behavior enforced by state laws. In one of the earliest ethnographic studies of Hijras, Serena Nanda demonstrates how the term Hijra functions as a blanket term for several religiously inflected queer identities (19). Nanda goes on to compare the Hijra to the Xanith in Oman and the Berdache in North America as examples of a "third sex," which destabilizes heteronormative binaries. However, such a classification merely confines non-conforming sexual practices into a third category without doing justice to the performative and biological diversity of the Hijra identity, which destabilizes not just sexual binaries but also taxonomic impulses intrinsic to institutionalized modernity. Hijras thereby occupy a resistant role within queer theory, enabling one to "think about sexual difference not in terms of naturalized identities but as a form of dissent, understood not simply as speech, but as a constellation of nonconforming practices, expressions, and beliefs" (Duggan 11).

As a site of resistance, the graveyard does not conform to conventional parameters: it has neither a clear basis of organization and identity nor a notable precedent. It is therefore appropriate that this space is initially occupied by Anjum, who is impossible to categorize. While Hijras have a history entirely distinct from queer activism in the West, some do occupy positions similar to those occupied by queer groups in the West: Saeeda, a younger Hijra in Roy's novel, "could speak the new language of the times—she could use the terms cis-Man and FtoM and MtoF and in interviews she referred to herself as a 'trans-person'" (Roy, *Ministry* 42).

Anjum does not disavow the similarity in their shared resistance to sexual binaries but refrains from acknowledging a single identity encompassing all Hijras. Instead, she uses the phrase "falling people" to explain her position in society, comparing herself to her dog, Biroo, who was rescued from a laboratory that performed experiments on animals:

> "Once you have fallen off the edge like all of us have, including our Biroo," Anjum said, "you will never stop falling. And as you fall you will hold on to other falling people. The sooner

> you understand that the better. This place where we live, where we have made our home, is the place of falling people. Here, there *is* no *haqeeqat* ["reality" in Urdu]. *Arre*, even *we* are not real. We don't really exist" (88; emphasis in original).[16]

In this passage, Roy uses queerness to shape resistance as posthuman "solidarity between disenchanted liberal subjects and those who were always-already disenchanted, those who seek to betray identities that legitimize or de-legitimize them at too high a cost" (Halberstam and Livingston 9). For subjects whose previously held identities and relationships to others are both exclusionary and exploitative, the space of the graveyard accommodates the present condition of precarity while simultaneously chronicling the past buried underneath it. This spatialization of the history of the nation highlights the consistent exclusion of those who have resisted, voluntarily or otherwise, being easily defined by existing linguistic conventions. The depiction of such a space enables the novel to engage with precarity not as a novel phenomenon brought about by the advent of neoliberalism and the demise of the welfare state; rather, neoliberalism becomes another stage in the advance of what is already an abject position shared by Hijras, Kashmiri freedom fighters, and Dalits. The elaboration of such abjection discredits both the inclusive myth of the nation and the narrative of neoliberalism as an epochal event that ushered precarity into the postcolonial nation.

Hijras' abjection stems from their radical exclusion from a heteronormative sexual economy in which their exaggerated performances of femininity expose what Judith Butler calls heterosexuality's "incessant and panicked imitation of its own naturalized idealization" (qtd. in Halbertsam and Livingston 5). The primary source of the fear and revulsion felt for the Hijra lies not in the aggressiveness of their demands for alms but in the constant suggestion of castration that undergirds their performances, which collapse a phallic order of power. Groups of Hijras are allocated specific territories by senior members within their community, and they are allowed to perform dances and collect money during a festival or an auspicious event at a house only within these spaces. Gayatri Reddy points out that the Hijra's most powerful threat against

those who refuse to pay at such events is to demonstrate their mutilated genitals, or the wound sustained during their castration. Reddy argues that in most cases, the threat of this demonstration alone is enough for people to negotiate a sum of money that is then paid to the Hijras (139). As Serena Nanda explains, castration is an important ritual that an incoming member of the Hijra community undergoes, a procedure that establishes a relationship between the inductee and Bahuchara Mata, the goddess who endows the castrated Hijra with the ability to confer fertility. The penectomy signals a moment of rebirth for the inductee, who is no longer associated with a previous identity and is accepted as an apprentice of the guru, the figure at the head of the Hijra household, itself a part of a larger network of Hijra families across the nation (Nanda 28).

This ritualized process of castration renders the Hijra unincorporable into an economy of bodily wholeness, a constant reminder of the abject in a symbolic order that wishes to remain free of any figure, like the abject, that "disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva 4). Since the wound is inflicted voluntarily during an event understood among Hijras as connoting death and rebirth, the act is illegible to a heteronormative order that emerges through and is dependent upon what is, according to Julia Kristeva, the repression of the primal violence of birth. This original violence separates the child and the mother and simultaneously introduces the child to the symbolic order, prior to which introduction is the state of abjection. The heteronormative order seeks to erase the abject non-subject, which exists prior to the subject-object binary of the symbolic, and yet the abject erupts in the margins of settled identities. The Hijra's wound is a constant reminder of this repressed violence, but identifying the Hijra as the other and ritualistically keeping them at bay by sacrificing money reinforces the heteronormative order. The fear that the Hijra's threat arouses can be attributed to the acknowledgement of the possible eruption of the abject, an eventuality that is avoided at a price.

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Anjum's mother is conscious of this position of abjection when she reflects upon the inadequacy of her

vocabulary, painfully brought home to her by the sexual indeterminacy of her child in a society that recognizes only binaries:

> she [Anjum] fell through a crack between the world she knew and world she did not know existed. There, in the abyss, spinning through the darkness, everything she had been sure of until then, every single thing, from the smallest to the biggest, ceased to make sense to her. In Urdu, the only language she knew, *all* things, not just living things but all things—carpets, clothes, books, pens, musical instruments—had a gender. Everything was either masculine or feminine, man or woman. Everything except her baby. (12; emphasis in original)

Not existing in language is for Anjum the beginning of a politics with undefined contours that also entails the denial of symbolic existence in language. Julián Daniel Gutiérrez-Albilla asserts that this eruption of the abject poses a challenge to the heteronormative order and claims that

> the ethical and political dimension of the abject can be associated with a feminist and queer theoretical project whose main function is less to remap linguistically a specific category of identity than to produce a rupture, a crisis in the social and symbolic order. Even if this rupture can only be provisional and temporary, it reconfigures a non-assimilative narrative that includes those who are excluded by the social symbolic. (66)

The emergence of a queer politics that does not recognize the stability of representative politics suggests possibilities of invention and restructuring that a coordinated resistance of the precariat might accomplish. Gutiérrez-Albilla's concept of a "non-assimilative narrative" posits a model of political resistance for the "falling people" that Anjum refers to, a model that eschews traditional methods of political resistance.

Because of its position in the city, the graveyard is an appropriate site for this political model. Using the notion of abjection to remap the contours of existing models of political resistance also prevents the reification of Anjum's sexual liminality, rooting sites of flux in her embodied difference, which affects actual spatial relations within the city.

For instance, Jannat situates itself politically between the old city (Old Delhi) and its modern counterpart (New Delhi) and the relations that exist between these two parts of the city. Following Doreen Massey's characterization of space as relational (3), the two cities can be seen as the result of networks of social relations that define each city, since their age can be posited only in relation to each other. Since New Delhi operates as the seat of (neo)liberal democratic power, it occupies a higher position both materially and discursively. Old Delhi, on the other hand, was the seat of power for the Mughal dynasty (1526–1857),[17] and following independence, Muslim neighborhoods in the area have been systematically left out of modernity.[18] As Ghazala Jamil suggests, the state has invested little to change the Hindu nationalist narrative of the Muslim community as backward, uneducated, and unpatriotic (4).

Hijras claim their authority from narratives embedded in the history of Old Delhi, with stories of their prestigious positions in Mughal courts being chief among these. Nanda notes that Hijras often nostalgically reminisce of such pre-British dispensations as examples of better days, when they were integral to the functioning of the city and had access to networks of power (52), even though Jannat breaks with some of these traditions as well. This is evident in how Kulsoom Bi, the head of the Hijras' household to which Anjum belongs, insists on taking newly recruited Hijras to the Red Fort for a narrativized representation of Indian history, where she painstakingly notes the "deep, distinct, rasping, coquettish giggle of a court eunuch" (Roy, *Ministry* 55), an insistence that speaks to this claim about the Hijras' historical presence there. State recognition in such cases also came with inclusion in the state's administrative apparatus: not only were Hijras a part of the Mughal court, they were also assigned spaces within the Mughal empire from which they could operate. These areas provided them with sustenance while also recognizing their claim to space within the city. Nanda notes that such territoriality is still of great significance among Hijras and the violation of these codes is often a cause of conflict among groups (44). Anjum's construction of the graveyard maintains continuity with the past by

staking claim to the city's space, but it also distinguishes itself from an older history of cooption within the Mughal regimes. The creation of the graveyard as a territory then appropriates Hijra families' codes of territoriality in a different locale, one that escapes the surveillance of the state through its very abjection.[19]

The focus on the abject as a foundation for resistance counters recent attempts by the Indian state to make Hijras' sexual identities legible through the incentivization of sex reassignment surgery, promoting what Vaibhav Saria calls "aspirations towards a coherent and correct biology" (2). Saria contends that such laws aim to "rehabilitate" Hijras into their birth families, prying them away from their Hijra families and communities. The novel's rejection of these legislative developments through its endorsement of non-familial communities and alliances indicates a mistrust of the state and its desire to categorize the nation's population into legible categories. The Hijras' claim to space derives its authority not from the state but from older histories and traditions that they then refashion to combat the state's neoliberal attempts at spatial control through the promotion of the family as a legible unit of heteronormativity. The eschewing of conventional categories of identity and identity-based politics on the basis of a pre-existing position of precarity places the Hijra outside the state's ideological surveillance, evident particularly in the state's attempts to force these identities into legible forms.

In Roy's novel, a confrontation between Anjum and Mr. Aggarwal (satirically referred to as the Accountant) brings out both the illegibility of such resistance and also its effectiveness as they argue over what to do with Udaya Jebeen when they discover her abandoned on the road. The Accountant is based on the current Chief Minister of Delhi, Arvind Kejriwal, famous for a populist anti-corruption uprising he led in 2011. The movement, based on Gandhian respectability, advocated for a society based on traditional codes of gender and caste and peddled visions of an idyllic past, as many authoritarian leaders do. The confrontation brings forth possibilities for new forms of resistance and fluid communities:

> The adversaries squared off.
>
> Anjum and the Accountant.
>
> . . . He, a revolutionary trapped in an accountant's mind. She, a woman trapped in a man's body. He, raging at a world in which the balance sheets did not tally. . . . He, who filled in forms and ticked boxes. She, who never knew which box to tick, which queue to stand in, which public toilet to enter (Kings or Queens? Lords or Ladies? Sirs or Hers?). He, who believed he was always right. She, who knew she was all wrong, always wrong. He, reduced by his certainties. She, augmented by her ambiguity. He, who wanted a law. She, who wanted a baby.
>
> A circle formed around them: furious, curious, assessing the adversaries, picking sides. It didn't matter. Which tight-arsed Gandhian accountant stood a chance in hell in a one-to-one public face-off against an old, Old Delhi Hijra? (Roy, *Ministry* 126)

What leads to Anjum's eventual victory is Mr. Aggarwal's inability to read the situation as Anjum proceeds to dance and sing a popular Bollywood song while onlookers sing along with her. The sudden and ephemeral moment of solidarity that forms around Anjum's performance is illegible to Mr. Aggarwal, who is forced to retreat as Udaya Jebeen is whisked away from the site of the confrontation.

This model of precarious political resistance also rejects forms of resistance premised on the work of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), lest one mistake Jannat for an allegorical representation of such seemingly autonomous organizations. As Steven J. Klees notes, these organizations have largely been coopted within the neoliberal economy through the increasing centralization of their operations, which has led to a disconnect from local conditions (50). Tina Wallace argues that the pressures of fundraising NGOs face and their move towards larger institutional donors have led them to demand the inclusion of marginalized people into spaces of power rather than question normative power structures (206). Such an approach is particularly true in the case of

gay and lesbian movements in the West, which have increasingly taken up a rights-based approach. This model further marginalizes the most vulnerable members of these communities, moving away from the queer framework that Roy espouses in the novel. As Dean Spade points out, such a model results in the cooption of the most privileged within gay and lesbian communities into a center that continues to operate through systemic oppression (27). This further highlights the need for forms of dissent that are conscious of the state's insidious role in the production of identities and its ability to coopt legible ones.

Anjum consistently refuses to be coopted, either by traditional families of Hijras or the mainstream. Instead, she seeks to oppose such structures through Jannat, a space that corresponds to her own ambiguity in its rejection of traditional modes of organized resistance. In rendering such a space queer, Anjum transposes her own embodied politics onto Jannat, revealing an unlikely and resistant optimism that Lisa Lau and Cristina Mendes argue has characterized Roy's works, both fictional and non-fictional (4). This embodied resistance functions as a model of resistance throughout the novel in its stringent refusal to adhere to any fixed social code and its consistent suspicion of the stable identities that such codes create.

III. Conclusion

As I argue above, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*' suspicion of fixed identities does not reject a politics of collectivity; rather, it gestures towards coordination as a means of resisting neoliberal precarization. The graveyard recasts the narrative of official Indian history, the celebration of which had obscured those at the margins of this history, especially since the liberalization of the economy in 1991. By challenging this version of Indian history, the precariat is able to spatialize time, thereby bridging the "imperceptible politics of everyday life and visible manifestations of new forms of subjectivity" (Parsanoglou et al. 227). The history narrated in the novel joins a plethora of histories from below to create a record of what Hayden White calls a "practical past," which facilitates the use of history for the present with an awareness that academic histories are often used in the service of nation-states (14).

In this practical sense, Udaya Jebeen becomes a focal point that members of the precariat can rally around without transforming her into a center. The child is a perfect allegorical representation of precarity in both its existential and political sense, while her illegibility in the language of the state, mirroring the unclassifiable nature of Anjum's abjection, is crucial to any form of non-co-optable resistance. The state's inability to categorize the child is particularly striking when she is described in the negative when her disappearance is investigated: "Name: UNKNOWN, Father's Name: UNKNOWN, Address: UNKNOWN, Age: UNKNOWN, Wearing: NO CLOTHES" (Roy, *Ministry* 265). The child's arrival in the graveyard initiates a series of actions by the precariat, who transform consciousness of their own abjection into praxis. This would qualify as an Event in Badiouan terms—an occurrence that highlights a part of society that was hitherto excluded (Hallward 115)—thereby challenging the nation's status as a united whole. The rupture caused by Udaya Jebeen's appearance and the precariat's consciousness of its condition allows for the redefinition of history in different terms: the state is recognized as a political institution that has actively engaged in precarization from its inception, marginalizing non-conforming spaces and the communities that live in them.

Most importantly, the Event of Udaya Jebeen's appearance is not merely temporal but also spatial: the reader is not privy to information about Udaya Jebeen's ancestry or her place of birth, suggesting the future possibilities of illegibility that characterizes the multitude in Jannat. The Event also holds the possibility of a precarious resistance that rejects existing models of resistance based on nativist returns to autochthonous identities that preclude any fluidity. Returning to the spatial metaphor of Rumpelstiltskin is instructive in this regard. An inability to map neoliberal spaces and explore the possibilities of precarious resistance points to a failure of spatial imagination, yet Roy sees the amorphousness of both Udaya Jebeen and Jannat as positive. In the novel, this amorphousness allows the precariat to evade the state's taxonomic impulses and provides it with a model of resistance that is drawn from both traditional and contemporary political frameworks. The novel thus suggests possibilities of resistance in a late capitalist

society, in which the very prospect of naming the target of resistance continues to daunt the oppressed.

Notes

1 Hijras are a group of communities living in different parts of India who do not conform to gender binaries. Their customs are drawn from diverse sources including Hinduism and Islam and their social positions have undergone changes according to different political regimes—Hindu, Muslim, and British. The members belong to one of any seven *gharanas* (households), each divided into several smaller groups with their own hierarchies. Hijras worship their own deities, but they can also be a part of any of the major religions in India and their customs are syncretic.

2 As Nanda points out, there are prohibitions imposed on prostitution among Hijras, but these are hardly enforced since prostitution is often a major source of income (12). However, Lal argues that this practice can still not be called traditional since many of the supposedly traditional occupations of Hijras came into being once traditional rights of Hijras (including rights to property and revenue-sharing) were curtailed during British rule, leading up to their criminalization under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 (828).

3 Jaffrelot rejects the use of the term "riot" for these events, arguing that they were carefully organized and had the backing of the state government and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the party then in power in Gujarat (165). The violence that followed, according to certain estimates, claimed the lives of two thousand Muslims and displaced more than 200,000 (Varadarajan 9).

4 Drawing on Levinasian ethics, Butler argues that the scriptural injunction to not kill invokes "an injurability" in the body of the Other (135), which in turn, suggests the precariousness of the life of the Self. This understanding of precarity does not necessarily distinguish between different forms of violence or acknowledge the specific forms of violence that emerge in the post-Fordist moment. During, on the other hand, makes allowances for the specific manifestations of precarity under contemporary global capitalism but still traces the specific investment in insecurity to "the secular notion that uneasiness and instability are primary to human existence" (22).

5 Standing defines the precariat as those lacking forms of security tied to their jobs and skills. He argues that a class of the precarious or the "precariat" is a recent phenomenon, tied to the rise of neoliberalism (10–11). Precarity, for Jørgensen and Schierup, burdens certain populations with increased risk, rendering every facet of their life precarious. They argue that precarity emerges from the transformations wrought by capitalism over the years, of which globalization is the latest manifestation. Similarly, Mitropoulos sees in the developments of the 1970s and 1980s precursors to contemporary precarity. She defines precarity primarily in

economic terms, tracing the emergence of precarity to the decline of unionization and the "flexibilization" of labor in these decades.

6 In the case of Anjum, for example, being a Hijra and a Muslim informs her responses to the neoliberalization of the state and dictates which spaces in the city she has access to. Her precarious condition is the result not merely of neoliberalism but of the networks that form as a result of the interaction between neoliberalism and traditional identities.

7 Ong suggests that the infinitely malleable nature of neoliberalism leads, in different societies, to "a range of possible anthropological problems and outcomes" (4).

8 The added benefit of fulfilling caste rules is worth mentioning here. Hinduism considers disposing of dead bodies to be impure, a job reserved for the lowest castes. Members of these castes are considered untouchable owing to the pollution that is supposedly imparted by their touch. They are also barred from occupying the same neighborhoods as members of upper castes.

9 This is a problem that has intensified since the deregularization of sanitation workers in New Delhi who are currently contractually employed under highly precarious conditions and offered little security despite the hazardous nature of their job. In the period between 1998 and 2018, only six contractual employees were regularized ("Safai Karamcharis").

10 The Malayalis are a linguistic group originating from the southern Indian state of Kerala.

11 A Dalit is a member of the lowest castes in India; see note 8.

12 Singh's work points out that states like Kerala and Tamil Nadu, which have organized themselves around language, have a common cultural identity that is dependent on linguistic community, whereas in the case of states like Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh, the absence of such clearly defined linguistic markers has impeded their achievement of developmental goals. Such metrics are, however, set by the state, and failure or success in their achievement follows the logic of the social contract between the state and citizen, where the latter agrees to subjection in return for security and in this case, the fruits of state-sanctioned development. Moreover, while the metrics remain focused on linguistic community; other factors of identity like caste can remain underexplored since they disrupt the notion of a united and monolithic community.

13 Lazzarato refers here to the processes and social relations that are responsible for the production of subjectivities in an economy. The subjective economy interpellates the subject such that their very existence caters to the sustenance of the political economy. He argues that "the central project of capitalist politics consists in the articulation of economic, technological, and social flows with the production of subjectivity in such a way that political economy is identical with 'subjective economy'" (*Signs and Machines* 8).

14 Both *anjuman* and *mehfil* refer to gatherings, which may refer to events as well as the space in which they occur.

15 Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, instituted at the point of Kashmir's accession to India, guaranteed a degree of autonomy to Kashmir. In August 2019, the article was abolished by the Hindu nationalist regime that is currently in power.

16 "Arre" is a term used widely across parts of India. It does not have a clear equivalent but is used as a term of address and translates approximately as "hey."

17 Forming a powerful Muslim dynasty whose empire was one of the largest in Indian history, the Mughals established their rule in 1526, displacing the erstwhile Afghan rulers. During the First Indian War for Independence, rulers in northern India rallied around the Mughal emperor, who had lost much of his power by then. The victorious British forces executed the emperor's heirs and banished him to present-day Myanmar. While the dynasty is an intrinsic part of the subcontinent's syncretic past, Hindu nationalists have focused exclusively on the Mughals' Muslim identity, which they see as inherently foreign. They frequently point to Mughal rule to create a narrative of past victimhood for the majority Hindu community.

18 This was partially because of the partition of India, which led to many rich Muslims migrating to Pakistan. Those remaining in the city were mostly members of the working classes and the lower castes (Jamil 5).

19 As I mention above, the state also employs the services of the graveyard to discreetly remove corpses that may have been the result of state-sponsored violence. Complete separation from the state does not, therefore, seem possible. Also, the construction of the guest house is completed by Mr. Gupta, who works as a businessman manufacturing blast-walls during the war in Afghanistan following 9/11, suggesting the graveyard's further imbrication within networks of global capitalism.

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