

Women's Resilience and Survival Practices in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the representation of women's resilience in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) through the framework of Feminist Literary Criticism. Focusing on two central characters Anjum, a hijra who establishes an alternative community in a Delhi graveyard, and Tilottama (Tilo), an enigmatic woman entangled in Kashmir's political violence. The analysis explores how women navigate conditions of marginalization and state violence through distinct survival practices. Anjum's resilience emerges through care work, community-building, and spatial transformation, creating infrastructure that enables collective survival for the socially rejected. In contrast, Tilo's survival operates through affective withdrawal, strategic opacity, and bodily persistence, refusing normative emotional labor and maintaining protective distance even within intimate relationships. Drawing on contemporary feminist theory, this analysis demonstrates how Roy's novel challenges singular narratives of women's agency, presenting multiple modalities of survival suited to different circumstances and capacities. The findings contribute to feminist literary scholarship by illuminating how women's everyday actions, whether building rooms, offering care, maintaining silence, constitute politically significant survival strategies that resist erasure and assert presence within conditions designed to eliminate them.

Keywords: Women's Resilience, Feminist Literary, Survival Practices, Political Violence

INTRODUCTION

Literature has long served as a critical medium for articulating women's experiences, particularly in contexts marked by social marginalization and political violence. Through narrative fiction, authors create spaces where women's voices, often silenced or overlooked in dominant historical and political discourses, can be heard and their struggles made visible. Literary texts do not merely document suffering, they also reveal the complex strategies through which women navigate oppressive systems, resist erasure, and assert their agency. Sharma (2020) argues, Feminist literature has long served as a powerful catalyst for social change, illuminating the structural and institutional oppression that women have endured while simultaneously celebrating their resilience and agency. In postcolonial and conflict-affected societies, where women frequently bear the compounded burdens of gender inequality, caste discrimination, religious violence, and state repression, literature offers a valuable lens for examining how resilience operates not as passive endurance but as active, creative survival. The representation of women's experiences in fiction thus becomes not only an aesthetic concern but also a political act, one that challenges reductive narratives and foregrounds the multiplicity of women's responses to adversity.

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) presents a particularly rich site for investigating women's experiences within intersecting forms of oppression. The novel which braids together the stories of Anjum, a hijra who builds an alternative community in a Delhi graveyard, and Tilo, an enigmatic woman entangled in India's political conflicts, creates a complex

portrait of survival and resistance. Roy's text engages directly with historical events including the 2002 Gujarat riots, the Kashmir insurgency, and the anti-corruption protests of 2011, positioning individual lives within broader political struggles. This ambitious scope, combined with Roy's attention to marginalized voices, makes the novel particularly significant for examining how women negotiate agency within conditions of violence and social exclusion.

Recent scholarship on *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* has explored various dimensions of the novel's engagement with marginalization, identity, and political violence. Kumar (2020) examines the novel through an ecofeminist lens, arguing that Roy demonstrates how nature and women are intertwined and investigates how nature might be welcomed to change the gendered issues that have been developed to silence women and other non-human life. Similarly, Kalyani and Jyothi (2023) explore the novel as postcolonial literature, examining how it delves into the political and cultural autonomy of individuals who were previously oppressed and how characters navigate the ongoing battle with society and self. Their study emphasizes the novel's engagement with themes of identity, marginalization, and resistance within postcolonial contexts. While these studies valuably illuminate the novel's engagement with gender, identity, environmental issues, and political violence, they tend to position women primarily as subjects of oppression or as symbols within broader theoretical frameworks. The specific ways in which women's everyday actions constitute survival practices and how these practices function as forms of agency and resistance remain underexplored.

This gap in the scholarship suggests the need for a more focused investigation into the mechanisms through which women characters in the novel enact resilience. Although previous research has acknowledged themes of oppression and resistance, less attention has been paid to women's active navigation of oppressive circumstances through concrete, everyday practices. A study that centers women's resilience, understood not merely as passive endurance but as active and creative survival, could contribute to a fuller understanding of how Roy represents women's agency within structures of oppression and how the novel challenges conventional narratives of victimhood.

This study therefore aims to analyze the representation of women's resilience in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, examining how female characters navigate conditions of violence and marginalization through everyday acts of survival. The analysis focuses on identifying the specific practices through which women characters maintain agency, create alternative communities, and assert their presence within hostile social and political environments. By attending closely to characters' choices and actions, this study seeks to illuminate how the novel positions women not simply as victims of oppression but as agents whose survival strategies constitute meaningful forms of resistance.

The theoretical framework for this analysis draws on Feminist Literary Criticism, which provides tools for examining how literary texts represent women's experiences and position women within relations of power. Feminist criticism emphasizes the importance of recognizing women's agency even within severely constrained circumstances and encourages attention to the ways in which texts may challenge or reinforce gender hierarchies. This approach allows for an examination of how characters' actions, however small or seemingly mundane, function as strategies for survival and assertions of autonomy.

This study argues that the actions and choices of women characters in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* function as survival practices that enable them to maintain agency amid conditions of political violence and social oppression. Rather than depicting women solely as victims of systemic injustice, Roy's novel portrays them as individuals who develop creative strategies for navigating hostile environments, forming solidarities, and carving out spaces of

autonomy. This representation challenges simplistic narratives and instead foregrounds the complexity and creativity of women's survival strategies in contexts of extreme marginalization, contributing to broader conversations about women's agency in postcolonial literature and literature of political violence.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative literary analysis to examine representations of women's resilience in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Using close reading of the primary text, the analysis focuses on scenes, descriptions, and dialogues involving Anjum and Tilottama to identify survival practices within contexts of marginalization and political violence. Guided by Feminist Literary Criticism, the study examines both visible actions.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Anjum

The Gujarat riots mark a crucial turning point in Anjum's life, after which her capacity for care becomes the foundation of her survival. When she witnesses Zakir Mian's murder and narrowly escapes death herself, she retreats into what Roy describes as a "Fort of Desolation" (p. 96). The trajectory of her recovery, however, takes an unexpected form. Rather than healing in isolation, Anjum begins to extend care outward, and this extension of care to others paradoxically becomes the mechanism of her own healing.

The transformation of the graveyard into Jannat Guest House demonstrates how care operates as both survival strategy and political intervention. Roy describes the physical expansion: "Over time Anjum began to enclose the graves of her relatives and build rooms around them. Each room had a grave (or two) and a bed. Or two. She built a separate bathhouse and a toilet with its own septic tank" (p. 101). There's something remarkably concrete about this description, Roy doesn't romanticize the process. Anjum's work involves actual construction: hauling materials, negotiating with corrupt municipal officials, stealing electricity from the mortuary next door. Barnes (2015) argues that care ethics "challenges the traditional separation between public and private spheres" and positions caring practices as essential to political life. What makes Anjum's care work political is precisely its refusal to remain confined to the private realm. By building infrastructure that enables others to survive, she challenges the state's abandonment of certain populations.

What's particularly striking is who Anjum chooses to care for. Roy notes that "Gradually 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" (p. 102). Her selectivity matters. She doesn't practice universal hospitality—that liberal fantasy of welcoming everyone. Instead, she creates sanctuary specifically for those rejected by other institutions, including hijra institutions. Her "esoteric" admission rules "warm, welcoming smiles or irrational roars of rejection, depending on nobody-really-knew-what", assert a form of sovereignty over her space (p. 101). She gets to decide who belongs in this alternative community, exercising an agency denied to her everywhere else. This selectivity aligns with Ahmed's (2017) argument that feminist politics involves actively creating worlds organized according to different values, where "those who do not quite inhabit the norms by which life is deemed livable" can nonetheless survive (p. 2). Anjum isn't trying to reform existing institutions or prove that hijras deserve inclusion. She's building something else entirely, operating by logics that don't make sense to the "Duniya" that rejected her.

The community that coalesces around Anjum in the graveyard represents a fascinating political formation. It's not based on shared identity the residents come from wildly different backgrounds. What brings them together is their shared experience of rejection and their need for a place to exist. Saddam Hussain, a Dalit man who changed his name and religion after witnessing his father's lynching; Imam Ziauddin, "being unkindly treated by his son and daughter-in-law" (p. 101); various hijras expelled from their gharanas; and the unclaimed dead from the hospital morgue. Each addition to this community corresponds to a physical expansion of the space. Roy writes: "Anjum's tin shack scaled up. It grew first into a hut that could accommodate a bed, and then into a small house with a little kitchen" (p. 97). The architecture literally expands to hold more people. Ludvig (2016) suggests that feminist solidarity emerges not from shared identity but through "political practices of world-making" that bring together those marginalized by intersecting systems of power. Jannat embodies this coalition politics, Muslim and Dalit and hijra, religious and secular, young and old.

Anjum's resilience manifests through consistent everyday practices rather than spectacular resistance. Roy describes her gradual return to self-care: "Anjum began to groom herself again. She hennaed her hair, turning it a flaming orange. She had her facial hair removed, her loose tooth extracted and replaced with an implant" (p. 96). These might seem like trivial concerns the hair color, facial hair, a tooth. But for someone whose body has been targeted for violence, whose very existence has been marked for elimination, bodily care represents reassertion of agency. Significantly, Anjum's self-care involves reclaiming feminine presentation: "She stayed with the Pathan suits but she had new ones tailored in softer colours, pale blue and powder pink, which she matched with her old sequined and printed dupattas" (p. 96-97). After violence that sought to erase her, she returns to being visibly herself hennaed hair, soft colors, sequins

Puar (2017) argues that for marginalized communities, aesthetic practices serve as "vital dimensions of survival" enabling subjects to "create and maintain dignity in conditions designed to deny it". The matching of dupattas to suits, the choice of soft colors, the care taken with appearance—these constitute what might be called a politics of dignity, insisting on beauty and self-determination even when the world says you have no right to either. Daily routines structure Anjum's survival in other ways too. The rhythm of caring for Jannat's residents and managing the funeral business provides structure. The regularized bribes to municipal officials Diwali and Eid, vegetarian and non-vegetarian meals carefully calibrated and create predictability. Even the stolen electricity running 24/7 establishes routine: TV always on, lights always available, the graveyard always illuminated. These practices might seem mundane, but mundanity is precisely what enables ongoing survival. The establishment of routine after trauma represents a return to livable time, as opposed to traumatic time that constantly circles back on itself.

Tilo

Tilo's defining characteristic throughout the novel is her refusal to speak, particularly about her past and her interior life. This silence operates differently from muteness or absence of voice; it represents active withholding, a deliberate refusal to make herself legible to those around her. When Garson Hobart encounters her at Naga's wedding, he observes: "She looked straight at me, but I felt as though someone else was looking out through her eyes. I was expecting anger, but what I encountered was emptiness" (p. 115). This emptiness is not absence but opacity refuses penetration, that returns the gaze without offering access to interiority.

The wedding scene itself demonstrates Tilo's resistance to normative scripts of feminine emotion. Roy describes her appearance: "She was thinner than I remembered. Her collarbones winged out from the base of her neck. Her gossamer sari was the colour of sunset. Her head was

covered, but through the sheer fabric I could see the smooth shape of her skull. She was bald, or almost" (p. 115). The shaved head, we learn, resulted from police violence, ACP Pinky Sodhi's "therapy" for a woman who had been with a militant. Yet at her wedding, surrounded by guests, Tilo offers no explanation, no narrative that would render her suffering comprehensible or her choices justifiable. When Garson comments on her hair, "she looked straight at me" and said simply: "It's just a haircut" (p. 115). Khanna (2020) argues that refusal of normative affect constitutes political resistance, particularly for women expected to perform emotional labor: "The refusal to be happy, to perform gratitude, to show pain appropriately—these refusals denaturalize the affective economies that sustain oppressive systems" (p. 234). Tilo's refusal to perform the expected emotions of a bride—joy, nervousness, gratitude—quietly disrupts the social script even as she goes through its motions.

Her silence extends beyond this wedding scene to structure her entire relationship with Naga. Garson observes years later that "she gave the impression of being utterly, unreachably alone, even at her own wedding" (p. 115). This unreachability persists throughout their marriage. When Garson encounters her by chance in Lodhi Gardens, he makes awkward small talk: "Hello! Where's the hubby?" Her response. Holding up the dog's leash and saying "The hubby? Oh sometimes he allows me to take myself for a walk" (p. 118)—uses humor to deflect while simultaneously revealing the dynamic of constraint. The joke turns on the reversal of subject and object, suggesting both that she is controlled and that she maintains ironic distance from that control.

Tilo's relationships are characterized by her withholding of the emotional work typically expected from women. Unlike Anjum, who expands her capacity for care to encompass an entire community, Tilo contracts, offering minimal emotional availability even to those closest to her. The novel presents this not as coldness but as necessary conservation of affective resources in the aftermath of unbearable loss.

The narrative of Tilo's time in Kashmir remains deliberately fragmented, told through others' perspectives rather than her own voice. Garson receives the call from Amrik Singh about a woman arrested with "Commander Gulrez" who asks that a message be passed: "G-A-R-S-O-N H-O-B-A-R-T" (p. 112). Even in extremity, seeking help, Tilo communicates through code, through a reference only certain people will understand. She does not explain who she is, why she was with a militant, what she needs. She offers only enough information to identify herself to someone who might help, maintaining opacity even in crisis.

When Naga arrives at the Shiraz Cinema interrogation center to retrieve her, "She won't say" whether the dead man was Musa (p. 113). This refusal to confirm what seems obvious protects something—whether Musa's memory, her own privacy, or simply her right to withhold information, remains unclear. The refusal itself matters more than its content. Weeks later, at the funeral procession where "half a million, sometimes even a million, people" take to the streets (p. 113), Tilo participates in public mourning while maintaining private silence about her specific grief and her relationship to the deceased. This dynamic exemplifies what Barad (2015) identifies as "non-sovereignty" of the subject under conditions of violence, the ways individuals lose control over their own narratives when state power intervenes. Barad argues that in contexts of militarization, "the question is not simply what one chooses but what range of choices remain available" (p. 398). Tilo's silence might be read as responding to the violation of having been arrested, interrogated, forcibly shaved some experiences that took control of her body and her story. By refusing to narrate these experiences, she reasserts a minimal sovereignty: they cannot make her speak.

The cost of this strategy becomes visible in her marriage. Garson notes that Naga and Tilo's wedding seemed to include "Musa's ghost wedged between them. I could almost see short, compact, with that chipped-tooth smile and that quiet air of his. It was as though the three of them were getting married" (p. 116). The ghost's presence registers the incompleteness of Tilo's separation from her past. Yet she offers Naga no access to that past, no narrative that would allow him to understand her grief or integrate it into their shared life. This withholding protects her interior world but also ensures her isolation. Hochschild (2012) distinguishes between emotional labor performed for wages and "emotion work" done in private relationships, arguing that women disproportionately perform such work to maintain relationships (p. 7). Tilo's refusal of this labor her unwillingness to explain herself, to make her feelings accessible, to do the work of helping others understand her constitutes a quiet rebellion against gendered expectations. Yet it also prevents genuine intimacy, leaving her fundamentally alone even within marriage.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate two distinct yet interconnected modes of survival under conditions of structural violence and social exclusion: Anjum's politics of care and Tilo's politics of refusal. Both characters respond to trauma and marginalization, yet their strategies differ significantly in orientation toward others, emotional expression, and political engagement. While Anjum reconstructs community through outward care practices, Tilo protects her autonomy through silence and affective withdrawal. These contrasting responses illuminate how marginalized subjects negotiate agency within constrained social and political contexts.

Anjum's trajectory illustrates how care can function simultaneously as a survival strategy and as a form of grassroots political resistance. Her transformation of the graveyard into Jannat Guest House represents a material intervention into spaces abandoned by the state. Rather than seeking recognition from dominant institutions, Anjum creates an alternative infrastructure that supports those rejected by society: hijras expelled from their communities, elderly individuals displaced by family conflict, and victims of caste or religious violence. In this sense, care becomes a form of world-building that redefines belonging. The expansion of the graveyard into a living community demonstrates that survival for marginalized groups often depends not on institutional inclusion but on the creation of parallel social structures. Such practices align with feminist care ethics, which position caregiving as a fundamentally political activity capable of reshaping social relations.

Importantly, Anjum's care is not universalistic but selective. Her admission rules to Jannat Guest House, sometimes welcoming and sometimes rejecting newcomers, signal the assertion of sovereignty over a space historically denied to her. This selective hospitality challenges liberal notions of unconditional openness and instead emphasizes the agency of marginalized actors in defining the terms of community. Through this selective practice, Anjum constructs a coalition space where individuals connected by shared vulnerability rather than shared identity can coexist. The resulting community reflects a politics of intersectional solidarity, bringing together people marginalized by religion, caste, gender identity, and age. Thus, Anjum's care practices transform the graveyard from a site associated with death into a space of collective survival and political imagination.

Furthermore, Anjum's resilience operates through ordinary routines rather than dramatic acts of resistance. Her return to grooming, the management of the funeral business, and the maintenance of daily rhythms at Jannat Guest House demonstrate how stability and dignity are gradually rebuilt after trauma. These mundane practices reveal that survival often depends on the restoration of everyday temporality. In the aftermath of violence, routine becomes a mechanism

through which individuals reclaim control over their lives. The emphasis on bodily care and aesthetic presentation also underscores the political significance of dignity. By continuing to dress, groom, and present herself according to her chosen gender expression, Anjum reasserts her right to exist visibly in a society that has attempted to erase her.

In contrast to Anjum's outward-facing politics of care, Tilo embodies a politics of refusal. Her defining strategy is the deliberate withholding of narrative and emotional transparency. Rather than seeking healing through communal engagement, she preserves her autonomy by refusing to explain herself or make her experiences legible to others. This refusal becomes particularly visible during her wedding to Naga, where she performs the ritual without displaying the expected emotional expressions of a bride. By resisting normative affective scripts, Tilo disrupts gendered expectations that women should make their emotions accessible and comforting to others.

Tilo's silence also reflects the consequences of state violence and surveillance. After her arrest and interrogation in Kashmir, her experiences become entangled with structures of militarized power that attempt to control both bodies and narratives. Under such conditions, speech itself can become dangerous. Tilo's refusal to narrate what happened to her may therefore function as a protective strategy, preserving a minimal form of sovereignty over her story. By maintaining opacity, she denies the state and even those close to her the ability to fully interpret or appropriate her experiences. Silence thus emerges not as passivity but as a deliberate form of resistance.

However, the discussion also reveals the emotional cost of this strategy. While Anjum's care practices generate community and mutual support, Tilo's withdrawal produces profound isolation. Her marriage to Naga illustrates this tension. By refusing to share her past and her grief over Musa, she protects her inner world but simultaneously prevents the development of genuine intimacy. This dynamic highlights the paradox of refusal as a survival strategy: it can preserve autonomy and dignity, yet it may also reinforce loneliness. In this sense, Tilo's silence demonstrates the complex trade-offs involved in resisting systems of domination.

Taken together, the contrasting experiences of Anjum and Tilo illustrate two complementary dimensions of resilience under oppression. Anjum's story emphasizes relational survival, showing how care and collective world-building can transform spaces of abandonment into communities of belonging. Tilo's narrative, by contrast, emphasizes individual autonomy and the power of refusal in contexts where speech and emotional transparency can be exploited. Both strategies challenge dominant expectations of how marginalized individuals should respond to violence. Rather than portraying resilience as heroic resistance or complete recovery, the novel presents survival as an ongoing negotiation between vulnerability, agency, and the search for dignity.

Ultimately, these findings suggest that survival under conditions of systemic violence cannot be reduced to a single model. Marginalized subjects adopt diverse strategies shaped by their histories, relationships, and political environments. By juxtaposing Anjum's politics of care with Tilo's politics of refusal, Roy reveals the multiplicity of ways individuals navigate trauma and exclusion. The novel therefore invites readers to reconsider conventional notions of resistance, highlighting how everyday practices such as caregiving, silence, and self-presentation can constitute powerful forms of political agency.

CONCLUSION

Anjum's survival is articulated through care work, community-building, and the transformation of marginal space into collective infrastructure. Her creation of Jannat Guest House illustrates how everyday practices traditionally coded as feminine become politically significant when they enable collective survival under conditions of state abandonment. In contrast,

Tilottama's resilience operates through silence, emotional withdrawal, and the refusal of relational and affective labor. Her strategy asserts agency by maintaining boundaries and protecting interior autonomy in the aftermath of state and intimate violence.

By juxtaposing these two figures, Roy's novel resists reductive narratives that equate women's agency solely with care, visibility, or resistance. Instead, it recognizes survival as an active yet constrained negotiation with power, manifesting through both connection and withdrawal. This study contributes to feminist literary criticism by foregrounding everyday practices as sites of agency and by challenging frameworks that privilege relationality as the primary expression of women's resilience.

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