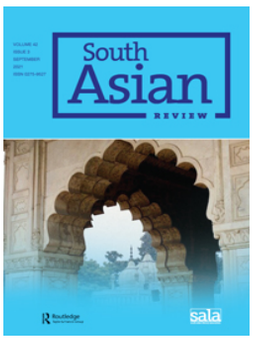

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Samadrita Kuiti

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"Mother-Warriors": Queer Motherhood as Resistance in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

Samadrita Kuiti

Department of English, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, USA

ABSTRACT

This article examines the motifs of queer motherhood and womanhood in Arundhati Roy's novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* as strategies of resistance against an increasingly totalitarian Indian state, particularly in light of the resurgence of Hindutva extremism and state-sanctioned repression of sexual, gender, caste, and religion-based minorities. Drawing on scholarship from queer theory, South Asian, and motherhood studies, and their underemphasized intersections, I interpret the novel's recalibration of adoptive adult-female/female-child relationships as a legitimate queer feminist praxis that, in turn, signals ahead to a utopian future that will pose an ideological challenge to the heteropatriarchal institutions of a nation currently experiencing the detrimental impacts of global capitalism and neoliberalism. I go on to contend that Roy's portrayal of the two female protagonists and their queered relationship to two abandoned girl children, whom they adopt and care for without the sanction of social and legal systems, is a direct critique of the devaluation of the lives of South Asian girl children and a violation of the norms of compulsory heteronormativity. Lastly, I supplement my reading of queer motherhood in the novel with analysis of both mainstream and academic discourses on real *hijra* mother-adoptive daughter relationships.

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Introduction

A recently published report by the Asian Center for Human Rights, a non-governmental organization based in Delhi, reveals a list of countries with severely skewed sex ratios that, in turn, illustrates the pervasiveness of female infanticide and feticide all over the globe. The grim findings of this study are preceded by information from a United Nation's Population Fund report that estimates nearly 117 million girls to have gone "demographically missing" in Asia alone primarily due to the rampant practice of sex-selective abortions (DTE Staff 2018). India appears at the fourth position on the former list with its severely skewed gender ratio of 111 males per 100 females. The

CONTACT Samadrita Kuiti samadrita.kuiti@uconn.edu Department of English, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT 06269, USA

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reasons for this urgent conundrum of disappearing women and girls - who are often killed in the womb - include the dowry system, disproportionately higher rates of malnutrition among female infants, and, of course, deeply entrenched patriarchal worldviews that emphasize the positionality of women as liabilities in an average Indian family. Recent census reports indicate that the female child population in India (in the age group 0–6) has dwindled from 78.83 million in 2001 to 75.84 million in 2011 (DTE Staff 2018). Female infants experienced higher mortality rates than male infants in all states except 5 in India as per a survey whose results were published by the Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner (Census of India) for the three year period between 2015–2017 (Tripathi 2019). It is against this social backdrop that I contextualize the portrayal of the two female protagonists in Arundhati Roy's novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* whose subversive decisions of adopting and raising two abandoned girl children outside the hallowed bonds of marriage or the patriarchal family unit is powerfully symbolic and serves as a direct critique of the devaluation of the lives of South Asian girl children.

This article argues that the novel's depiction of womanhood and motherhood embraced by these two characters (hijra sex-worker Anjum and cisgendered, heterosexual Tilo) represents a key strategy of resistance against various hegemonic forces of the Indian nation-state propped up by heteropatriarchal institutions of power. Specifically, the leitmotifs of queer womanhood and motherhood enact a ritualistic violation of the norms of domesticized heteronormative marriage and motherhood that are foundational elements of social and political life in modern India. This, in turn, signposts a queer utopian future that will likely pose an ideological challenge to the same institutions that undermine the lives of women and other vulnerable minoritized populations in the country. Lastly, this article delineates the ways in which Roy's authorial handling of the motif of hijra motherhood supplements the current bodies of knowledge on the lived reality of LGBTQI populations in India aside from being an interesting new intervention at the intersections of South Asian studies, queer, and feminist theories.

What is Queer Motherhood?

In the introduction to her work *Queering Motherhood*: *Narrative and Theoretical Practices*, Margaret F. Gibson notes that the prevalent hegemonic discourses about motherhood can be counterproductive toward the formation of alternative theories of mothering (Gibson 2014, 6). The field of maternal theory itself is unequivocally premised on a bevy of cisnormative and heteronormative assumptions, one of them being the centrality of the nuclear family model. Of course, scholars such as bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Cherríe Moraga, and Dorothy Roberts among others have sought to extend the boundaries of the academic discussion on motherhood by de-centering this emphasis on the traditional, heteronormative family and by studying the intersections of motherhood, homophobia, cultural imperialism, and racist oppression. However, queer practices of mothering and motherhood still remain a very understudied area of research. Gibson goes on to contend,

> Queering motherhood must attend, not only to motherhood as it occurs in overarching discourses and institutional restrictions, but also to everyday activities, material inequities, and embodied relationships. (Gibson 2014, 10)

Motherhood in Arundhati Roy's novel, in particular, reconfigures female adult-female child relationships and not only involves women who are queer in terms of sexual or gender identity but also women who embrace motherhood in extraordinary circumstances often strongly contravening the norms of biologically induced motherhood or motherhood within the realm of heteronormative marriage and heterosexual domestic partnerships. More specifically, queer motherhood in the novel recalibrates the nature of adoptive relationships altogether and emerges as a veritable mode of resisting systemic misogyny in a nation trapped in the vortex of varied totalitarian forces. The adoptive relationships in the novel emerge outside the purview of social and legal systems. The characters of Anjum and Tilo (one, a hijra[1] sex-worker and another, a cis-gendered woman) embrace motherhood under extraordinary circumstances by rescuing two abandoned girl children from the steps of the iconic Jama Masjid and the streets of Jantar Mantar (respectively) in the city of Delhi and caring for them. Their motherhood is in the same mold as Kelly Jeske describes her own experience as a mother of a biological son now transitioning into girlhood "as a place of contradiction, as a borderland of complexity as a place I can stand in truth … " (Jeske 2014, 168).

Queer mothering could also enact a significant critique of the sanctity of blood ties and biological kinship aside from underscoring the marginalization of motherhood as a pertinent subject of inquiry within the scope of queer theory. This is primarily because queer theory deems the patriarchal family unit to be "an institution through which "abnormal" sexuality is regulated by the state" (Park 2013, 20). However, some motherhood studies scholars have precisely attempted to remedy this oversight by probing the theory and practices of non-biological, adoptive, and other non-normative forms of motherhood which in turn generate alternative models of family and kinship. We can reference Cherríe Moraga's influential work *Waiting in the Wings: Portrait of a Queer Motherhood* on her experiences with both adoptive and biological motherhood. In this regard, it may be apposite to emphasize the distinction between the terms, family and *familia* as theorized by Moraga in the book*:*

> Growing up, the *we* of my life was always defined by blood relations. We meant family. We were my mother's children, my abuela's grandchildren, my tios' nieces and nephews. To this day, most of my cousins still hold onto a similar understanding of *we*. Not I […]
>
> So the search for a we that could embrace all the parts of myself took me far beyond the confines of heterosexual family ties. I soon found myself spinning outside the orbit of that familial embrace, separated by thousands of miles of geography and experience. Still, the need for familia, the knowledge of familia, the capacity to create familia remained and has always informed my relationships and my work as an artist, cultural activist, and teacher. (Moraga 1997, 18)

What Moraga alludes to as a *familia* in her work may be the most appropriate term to describe the utopian community of various marginalized subjects that come together in Arundhati Roy's novel to pose a dialectical counterpoint to a sociopolitical order sustained by pernicious, heteronormative practices in modern India. Same can be said

about the *familia* of hijras who come to reside within the walls of the Khwabgah or the brothel for hijra sex-workers in an Old Delhi neighborhood. These two types of *familia* become instrumental in offering refuge to two orphaned girl children who ultimately seem poised to herald the advent of a utopian future for a modern India mired in many social and political problems, not least of which is the emergence of Hindu supremacist forces, the suppression of the rights of Kashmiris, and pervasive caste and gender-based prejudice. Among the discourses of queer mothering emerging from South Asia, it is important to consider the crucial scholarship of Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai. For instance, Vanita sheds light on the ideas of dual motherhood and same-sex pairings in her analysis of various creation hymns within the *Rig Veda* in a section from her edited work *Same-Sex Love in India*. She writes:

> The songs present a recurrent vision of the universe as pervaded by natural forces functioning as parent figures, whose protection is sought by humans. These parent figures often are addressed as father and mother; very often, too, they are conceived as pairs of mothers or groups of mothers. Thus, Heaven and Earth (Dyaus and Prithvi) are ambiguously gendered and are sometimes addressed in the same hymn as Father and Mother, as twin mothers and as Friends. (Vanita 2000, 14)

Since the notion of dual motherhood or multiple mothers already exists in many ancient Indian texts, it is imperative for us to grasp the specific ways in which Roy's novel adds newer dimensions to the notions of non-normative motherhood within the context of South Asian studies.

Queering Indian Womanhood

Aptly, Arundhati Roy opens her much-awaited second novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* with a poetic description of the causality between the rampant use of diclofenac (a chemical used as medicine for cattle) and the extinction of vultures from the Indian landscape. It is this tendency to sympathetically examine the multi-layered after-effects of predatory capitalism and globalization that pervades the novel. Slowly but sure-footedly, Roy familiarizes us with the complex array of forces and actors – both local and global – that interact with each other to give rise to the conundrum of the modern India of the twenty-first century – a country trying desperately to make its mark in the arena of global politics while attempting to hide the grotesque realities of a low-intensity civil war now going on for decades in the north (Indian occupation of Kashmir), cross-border geopolitical tension, and the suppression of the rights of already-marginalized minorities like the Muslims, the Chamars or lower-caste/ "untouchable" Hindus, and the hijras or the intersexed/transgender community. In a sense, Roy's narrative tries to offer a multiplicity of perspectives encompassing the grim political reality of new India. From the covert guerrilla warfare being waged in the dense forests of Dandakaranya by resilient groups of India's indigenous population and the macabre state-sponsored pogrom against Muslims in 2002 in Gujarat to the human rights violations committed by the Indian Army in Kashmir, the novel tries to cover a lot of ground with varying degrees of success.

Replete with raw descriptions of planned and unplanned acts of cruelty perpetrated by the agents of increasingly unstable state institutions (such as corrupt army and

intelligence officers, unethical journalists and so on) against vulnerable groups of people, the novel's emphasis on the motif of queer womanhood offers a possible way of countering the threat of such forces. Both the central characters of the novel – Anjum and Tilo – by virtue of their defiance of hostile institutions epitomize a depiction of a womanhood that signifies a sharp departure from the archetypal image of the reticent Indian woman with her infallible mothering instinct. Anjum, for instance, becomes the architect of her own kind of rebellion by erecting an unauthorized structure on government-owned land (*Jannat Guest House*) and transforming it into a utopian safe haven for people who have been preyed upon by the *Duniya* (or the world outside) and its corrupt ideals. Similarly, Tilo becomes implicated in the quest for Azadi[2] or freedom in Kashmir by aiding the seemingly treasonous endeavors of her Kashmiri lover. As a biologically intersexed individual who undergoes multiple gender reassignment surgeries and chooses to identify as a woman, Anjum's very characterization ruptures the traditional construct of the heterosexual cisgendered Indian woman. Parallelly, Tilo is depicted as a woman marked by her innate recalcitrance, who contradicts the conventional construction of the domesticated, demure Indian woman often featured in Western discourses on the position of women in India. Modeled after Roy herself (as the review of the novel in *The Atlantic* suggests), Tilo emerges as a stoic activist figure, who shuns a life of comfortable domesticity by leaving her husband of fourteen years to hurl herself into the realm of perpetual financial and social uncertainty (Sehgal 2017). Her deliberate defiance of heteropatriarchal notions of femininity manifest most prominently in the descriptions of her physical appearance which mark her as genderqueer in a sense. This can be evidenced in the way the character of Biplab Dasgupta (a high-ranking officer with the Intelligence Bureau who plays an important role in the novel) describes her in the middle section of the book.

> She wore no make-up and did nothing - none of those delightful things girls do, with their hair, or their eyes, or their mouths – to augment their looks. She wasn't tall, but she was rangy, and she had a way of standing, with her weight on the balls of her feet, her shoulders squared, that was almost masculine, and yet wasn't. (Roy 2017, 157)

Even the truncated name Tilo alludes to a systematic disavowal of the femininity embedded in the name Tilottama and to a refusal to perform a severely gendered identity. It is worthwhile to point out here that Tilo marries her husband, son of a high-ranking Indian diplomat, simply as a ruse to conceal her involvement in the political movement for freedom in Kashmir. Her husband's status as a well-known journalist and as the son of a high-ranking bureaucrat in the upper echelons of the Indian government further provides her with the perfect cover to conduct her activist work of compiling documentary evidence of the Indian Army's human rights violations in the state of Kashmir. Anjum and Tilo's non-normative womanhood refuses to carry the weight of patriarchal traditions, the burden of which is too often placed on women in India. Although Tilo has romantic relationships with multiple men and even marries one, romantic love in such contexts often serves as subterfuge to aid her efforts in resisting the totalitarian forces undergirding the Indian nation-state. Lisa Lau and Cristina Mendes hail these two women protagonists as "heroines who are eccentric, idiosyncratic, fairly intransigent, insistently autonomous, and recalcitrantly resistant to

societal categorization. In this way they are markedly unfeminine, particularly within the parameters of Indian femininity" (Lau and Mendes 2019, 8).

The two central characters Anjum and Tilo prove themselves to be indispensable to the political project of resisting the onslaught of various hegemonic systems by also invalidating the ideals of heteronormativity that underpin our conventional notions of motherhood. Tilo becomes pregnant with her Kashmiri lover Musa's child toward the end of the novel but decides to undergo an abortion because she does not "wish to inflict herself on a child" (Roy 2017, 397). Similarly, Anjum comes to adopt Zainab and later emerges in the role of a co-mother to baby Udaya Jebeen. From the beginning of the novel, Tilo's genderqueer characterization anticipates her rejection of heteronormative motherhood which would have eventually led her to step into the role of a domesticated care-giver. Instead of emulating and perpetuating the same conventions of biological motherhood within the vaunted sphere of the heteropatriarchal family unit, she makes the audacious choice of picking up an abandoned infant girl from the streets of Jantar Mantar in Delhi. Thus, when Tilo steps into the role of a mother it is in the capacity of a newly separated single woman who has never given birth. Júlia Vallasek claims that this kidnapped baby or Udaya Jebeen "symbolizes the future, a possible positive turn of tragic events, and life playing triumphantly over the tombs" (Vallasek 2018, 164). This can be reaffirmed if we note the textual evidence that indicate that the baby (named partly after Musa's daughter Miss Jebeen the First who is killed in a rogue encounter with the Indian Army in Kashmir) is a symbol of hope for the future. There are ample clues interspersed throughout the novel which hint at her emergence in the future as a savior-figure.

The chapter in which the child is first introduced to the readers is quite tellingly entitled "The Nativity", which solemnly juxtaposes images of giant billboards advertising the advent of brands such as Kmart, Walmart, Starbucks with those of the "sleeping bodies of homeless people" which "lined" the "high, narrow pavements" of the city of Delhi. Quite transparently, Roy's intention here is to expose the government's hypocrisy of touting India as the preferred destination of global capital while the vast body of Delhi's urban poor[3] are forcibly evicted from their homes so that the city could don the disguise of an attractive new hub of financial investments from the Global North. Roy very strategically addresses the timeline of this deceptive transformation by describing it as the "summer Grandma became a whore".

> But this was to be the dawn of her resurrection. Her new masters wanted to hide her knobby, varicose veins under imported fishnet stockings, cram her withered tits into saucy padded bras and jam her aching feet into pointed high-heeled shoes. They wanted her to swing her stiff old hips and re-route the edges of her grimace upwards into a frozen, empty smile. (Roy 2017, 100)

It seems that the baby's appearance in the novel is purposefully foregrounded against tangible evidence of deepening income inequality and the concomitant struggles of a nation having to confront the rift between its fabricated media image as the "world's favorite new super power" and the rawness of its daily socio political tragedies. It is as if the baby's emergence "in a pool of light, under a column of swarming neon-lit mosquitoes, naked" counteracts the squalor of her immediate surroundings (Roy 2017, 100). Her birth is clearly an auspicious event.

It is later revealed that the baby itself is born out of a brutal gangrape of Revathy, a female guerrilla member of the outlawed Communist Party (Maoist) in the state of Andhra Pradesh, and that she had smuggled her to Delhi in order to ensure her safety. Revathy had decided against playing "a maternal role and continue(d) with her role in a violent revolution against the state" which Meghan Gorman-DaRif considers to be "symbolic". Gorman-DaRif further contends that Revathy's character arc subtly undercuts "the image of the mother-warrior prized by Western feminists" (Gorman-DaRif 2018, 308). Despite agreeing with this interpretation, I do not consider Revathy's motherhood arc in the novel as one symbolizing liability. Instead, the novel complicates the idea of heteronormative motherhood by repurposing it into a device to manufacture a grassroots social revolution. The mothers in the novel are, indeed, warriors but not in the same way as "prized by Western feminists". Their motherwork is neither appropriated within the fold of the patrilineal nuclear family unit nor is it bestowed with legal sanction. The motherwork that characterizes both Tilo and Anjum's parenting practices also strongly repudiates the notion of *reprosexuality* which Michael Warner defines as "interweaving of heterosexuality, biological reproduction, cultural reproduction, and personal identity" in the introduction to his work *Fear of a Queer Planet*. Warner unpacks the idea of reprosexuality even further:

> Reprosexuality involves more than reproducing, more even than compulsory heterosexuality; it involves a relation to self that finds its proper temporality and fulfillment in generational transmission. Queers often find themselves in transgression not simply of a commandment to be fruitful and multiply, but more insidiously of the self-relation that goes with it. (Warner 1991, 9)

Even though Warner's claim about reprosexuality resonates with the larger anti-relational turn in queer theory which robustly critiques the idea of reproductive sexuality as the basis of a heteronormative society, I wish to emphasize that Roy's critique of reprosexuality is achieved without delegitimizing the lived experience of the child characters in the novel such as Zainab and Udaya Jebeen who can be considered representatives of the vast body of India's neglected girl children. Even though the children themselves are born of heterosexual unions[4], they are violently excluded from those same social systems that perpetuate *repronarrativity* or the idea that "our lives are somehow made more meaningful by being embedded in a narrative of generational succession" (Park 2013, 76). This is because they are unwanted by their own biological kin. The adoptive relationships in the novel between mothers and daughters, therefore, queers not only the idea of motherhood itself but also the family while simultaneously contravening the notions of both reprosexuality and repronarrativity. Both children's actual genealogical identity eventually loses its significance.

It can also be argued that Roy is concerned with repudiating an archetypal Indian family's obsession with their biological progeny but at the same time also revoking an overarching Edelmanian disavowal of the figure of the "child" altogether. In her article "Radical Experiments Involving Innocent Children", Jane Ward re-emphasizes the dominant bodies of criticism of Lee Edelman's *No Future* (2004) which point out Edelman's failure to take into account the subjectivities of actual children while firmly denouncing the side "fighting for the children" and repudiating the politics of "reproductive futurism" (Ward 2013, 235). Even though Ward praises José Esteban

Muñoz's work on queer futurity which is hailed as a direct rebuttal to Edelman's work within queer theory, she finds the glaring absence of actual children from Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia* (2009) quite disappointing. She asserts that children "figure prominently in the lives of queer people of color" by citing information from a study published by the Williams Institute which suggests that racial and ethnic minorities are more likely to be queerly parenting the children of others. Consequently, Ward avers that "queer women of color" are likely to be engaged in the utopian project of "queer world-making" (236). This holds true for both the mothers of the novel - Tilo and Anjum - whose individual and joint motherwork nurtures the lives of discarded girl children who eventually emerge as allegories of hope. The figure of the girl child is, therefore, imbued with tremendous socio-political significance in the novel. Zainab, for instance, goes on to become a champion of stray and abused animals while Udaya Jebeen is indirectly hailed as a symbol of hope for a tomorrow that is yet to materialize.

Coming back to the depiction of maternal figures in the novel, as readers we witness nearly all of them eschewing normative roles designated for them in traditional Indian society. Revathy, for instance, refuses to embrace a motherhood forced upon her by the agents of a state in the most barbaric way possible. However, neither does she terminate her pregnancy, nor does she resign herself to a life of motherly care-giving. Instead, she prioritizes the baby's safety and brings her to Delhi far away from the dangerous geopolitics of Andhra Pradesh where the dispossessed population of indigenous people continue their ceaseless battle to protect their land and resources from the clutches of the capitalist, neoliberal state[5]. Revathy, thus, ends up queering her own experience of motherhood by fulfilling her role as the biological mother by giving birth but consequently refusing to nurture a child born out of a violent rape.

In her article "Utopian Kinship?: The possibilities of Queer Parenting" Laura V. Heston, explores various alternative configurations of parenting specifically privileging the positionality of the child within discourses of queerness and utopianism. She particularly coins the term "chosen parenting" to put a name to the collective parenting practices of individuals with no biological or legal ties to the children they are parenting and additionally with no "romantic connection to their child's other parents" (Heston 2013, 255.). It can be said that Anjum and Tilo's queer motherhood constitutes a form of "chosen parenthood" since none of them ever physically meet the biological parents of the children they choose to adopt. They also do not follow a legal adoption process. In both cases, the motherhood depicted contravenes the laws of the domestic space since the girl children of the book are raised within utopian communities (Jannat Guest House and Khwabgah) and by alternative networks of family and kin. These girl children are born out of violent rape or are treated as unwanted surpluses by a social system that devalues the lives of daughters at the cost of elevating sons who are deemed indispensable to the project of the nation. Either of these two girls' membership in heteronormative and virulently patriarchal Indian society is questionable at best, inarticulable at worst. Both their trajectories serve as symbolic evidence of the pervasive violence that endangers the lives of South Asian and Indian women in particular.

India's Abandoned Daughters and Hijra Mothers

The identity of Revathy's biological and Tilo's adopted child, who is named Udaya[6] Jebeen later on in the novel as a testament to her complex biological, social, and cultural ancestry, thus, seems to be one in flux. She is born as a result of the political system's depredations of the land and indigenous people (especially the bodies of indigenous women) as symbolized by her conception through rape. Additionally, she comes to emblematize not only the state-sanctioned brutalities endured by indigenous people in the heart of central and southern India but also the blood-letting in Kashmir. This is because we come to know she has been named after Miss Jebeen the First, Musa's daughter, who is killed in a rogue military encounter in Kashmir. Just as Tilo decides to be an adoptive mother to Udaya Jebeen, Anjum comes to adopt Zainab (an abandoned three-year old girl that she encounters on the steps of the Jama Masjid in Delhi) during her time as a Hijra sex-worker resident of the Khwabgah. Roy describes Anjum's reactions to the first gesture of trust that young Zainab shows toward her in a very strategic way by stating that Anjum's body (for the first time in a long time) "felt like a generous host instead of a battlefield" (Roy 2017, 34).

To contextualize the arc of Anjum's queer motherhood better, it might be apposite for us to examine some stories of Hijra motherhood in India. It is now common knowledge that Anjum's trajectory in *Ministry* is partly based on Mona Ahmed's story, one of India's most iconic hijra figures, whose life has been chronicled most deftly in Dayanita Singh's book *Myself Mona Ahmed* (2001). Born biologically male in 1937, Mona Ahmed was shunned by her "blood family" and eventually went on to make a home for herself in Mehndiyan, a graveyard in Delhi, which she helped transform into a refuge for homeless rejects not unlike Anjum does in the novel (Bhutani 2018). Mona also adopted an orphaned infant girl later on in life and named her Ayesha, much like Anjum adopts Zainab. Mona and Ayesha's story is, of course, not the only famous instance of Hijra motherhood in India. There is also the life of Zeenath, a transgender sex-worker operating in Kamathipura, one of the prime red-light districts in the city of Mumbai. In two separate articles published in *Al Jazeera* and the *Open Magazine*, Chinki Sinha documents the story of Zeenath as representative of many eunuch or transgender/intersexed/hijra mothers who are stepping up to adopt India's marginalized and abandoned girl children and bestowing on them the blessing of a livable life. Zeenath, in particular, seems to have adopted a girl child (Saleha) whose biological mother (another sex worker from Kamathipura) was on the verge of terminating her pregnancy (Sinha 2012, 2013).

Sinha also chronicles the story of a hijra sex-worker named Gauri Sawant who had adopted an abandoned girl child named Gayatri whose biological mother was HIV-positive like Saleha's and had passed away recently (Sinha 2013). Both articles seem to paint a picture of an unequal legal system that does not enshrine the right of hijras or third-gender identified individuals to legally adopt children. Yet in the absence of the maternal intervention by hijra women like Zeenath and Gauri, it seems a subset of India's abandoned, neglected girl children (especially those born of HIV-positive mothers who are themselves sex-workers or belong to other marginalized communities) like Saleha and Gayatri will have faced certain death or unimaginably worse fates. Sinha's article published in *Al Jazeera*, further, discusses the mythical hijra figure named Maji

who, according to a local folk tale, once became pregnant with a child. Sinha notes that Zeenath travels to Ajmer (in the Indian state of Rajasthan) every year to visit the shrine erected in honor of Maji. In India, it is tradition for hijras to bestow their "blessings" on expecting mothers or women who have already given birth yet, ironically, they are debarred from becoming mothers themselves (Sinha 2013)[7]. Ina Goel broaches this same subject matter in her article entitled "What Does it Mean to be a Hijra Mother?" by discussing the possibility of re-envisioning motherhood through the lens of "trans subjectivities". She analyzes the Bollywood film *Tamanna* (1998) directed by Mahesh Bhatt that offers a compelling portrait of hijra motherhood by dramatizing the real-life story of a hijra named Tikku and her relationship with her daughter Tamanna (Goel 2018; Bhatt 1998). Tamanna and Tikku's arc is very similar to Anjum and Zainab's relationship in Roy's novel. Both Zainab and Tamanna are discarded by their biological families as infants and both are raised by affectionate hijra parents (Anjum and Tikku). Roy's portrayal of Anjum and Zainab's relationship, therefore, serves to shed light on the oft-neglected stories of Hijra mothers in Indian society.

The Evolving Nature of Motherhood Discourses in India

To unpack the motif of queer motherhood even further, we should first pay attention to the spirited revocation of the idea of *monomaternalism* that emerges in the novel. The abandoned girl children that are adopted by the two central characters in the book have more than one mother because of their unique social circumstances. Roy is very careful not to turn either Anjum or Tilo into the "owners" of the girl children they adopt and nurture. Her depiction of queer motherhood is, in fact, a violation of *monomaternalism* which Shelley M. Park describes in the following way in the introductory chapter of her book on queering motherhood:

> Monomaternalism, as an ideological doctrine, resides at the intersection of patriarchy (with its insistence that women bear responsibility for biological and social reproduction), heteronormativity (with its insistence that a woman must pair with a man, rather than other women, in order to raise children successfully), capitalism (in its conception of children as private property), and Eurocentrism (in its erasure of polymaternalism in other cultures and historical periods). (Park 2013, 7)

Roy's novel serves to destroy the illusion that children cannot be co-mothered or that children are only private property of the parents and advocates for the idea of polymaternalism. This is legitimated if we look at the earlier parts of the novel which describe Zainab's arrival in Khwabgah.

> [...] And so, by default, Zainab - the name Anjum chose for her - stayed on in the Khwabgah where she was lavished with more love by more mothers (and, in a manner of speaking, fathers) than any child could hope for. (Roy 2017, 35)

A little later on in the novel, the readers are introduced to the character of Saeeda who is described as "much younger than Anjum" and "second in line for Zainab's affections" (Roy 2017, 42). It is Saeeda who steps into the role of "Mummy" or the motherly role vacated by Anjum when the latter leaves for Gujarat and is absent from the Khwabgah for a while owing to the disruption caused by the violent religious riots of Gujarat in 2002, a historical event Roy briefly touches on in her novel[8]. Upon her

return, when Anjum seems to feel conflicted about the role Saeeda has come to play in Zainab's life, Zainab clarifies that Saeeda is her "mummy" and that Anjum is "Badi Mummy" (or Big Mummy). This sort of polymaternalism which Shelley M. Park describes as "a way of moving toward a notion of families as coalitional entities requiring practices of solidarity among and between the various inhabitants of diasporic homes" is validated in the novel in differing contexts (Park 2013, 13). The notions of co-mothers and co-mothering are strongly legitimized not only in the context of Zainab's character arc but also in the case of the Udaya Jebeen who comes to be mothered by three different women - her biological mother Revathy, and her adoptive co-mothers Tilo and, later on, Anjum.

For instance, by deciding to "steal" and raise Udaya Jebeen as a prospective future rebel and by bringing her to *Jannat Guest House*, Tilo becomes Udaya's queer or adoptive mother in the earlier part whereas Anjum comes to occupy the role of the primary co-mother later on in the narrative. Roy seems to express great hope for the future through the last sentence of the novel by incorporating the perspective of a "dung beetle" named Guih Kyom who is "wide awake and on duty, lying on his back with his legs in the air to save the world in case the heavens fell". It seems even Guih Kyom feels certain that "things would turn out all right in the end" because "Miss Jebeen, Miss Udaya Jebeen, was come" (Roy 2017, 444). Even though Roy is never clear on what specific function "Miss Udaya Jebeen", the implied savior of tomorrow, might perform, as readers now familiar with the laws of this fictional world we can conclude that her survival in the face of great odds itself holds the key to unlocking a brighter future. The combined efforts of Revathy (her Naxalite biological mother), Tilo, and Anjum, the three co-mothers, keep alive the possibility of resistance in the future by ensuring the baby's safety and well-being. In another section of the novel, it is revealed that Tilo herself was adopted by her biological mother, who had become pregnant outside of wedlock in rural, conservative Kerala and as a result had to hide her identity as an unwed mother. It seems that Tilo's mother, a Syrian Christian woman, had an illicit love affair with a man belonging to an "Untouchable" caste (Roy 2017, 159). This is, perhaps, a deliberate authorial nod to the characters of Ammu and Velutha who had a very similar transgressive inter-caste love affair in Roy's *The God of Small Things* which, in turn, had ushered in disastrous consequences for both. It is almost as if Tilo is the love child that Ammu and Velutha were never able to have and is, thus, carrying on with the legacy of their rebellion against society (Roy 1997).

Thus, Tilo was brought up by an essentially unmarried woman who despite being her actual biological mother had never owned up to that truth perhaps anticipating the social stigma that entails unwed motherhood in India. This queering of Tilo's own experience as a girl child perhaps lays out the groundwork for her attitude toward the norms of ritualized domesticity and her eventual embrace of yet another kind of non-conventional motherhood. The novel, thus, elevates the maternal labor of the two adoptive mothers as thoughtful, deliberate political action laying the groundwork for a utopian future for India's abandoned daughters. Filippo Menozzi in his article ""Too Much Blood for Good Literature": Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

and the Question of Realism" offers a very particular interpretation of the novel by probing its incapacity to present any form of consolation to the victims of state-sponsored atrocities in India. He argues:

> While manifesting Roy's undiminished commitment to tell the truth and to witness important political and social events in contemporary India, the novel refuses to reduce the representation of reality to a mere "document". Instead, it emphasizes the inability of writing to offer any sort of "consolation", healing or reconciliation. (Menozzi 2019, 22)

Despite agreeing with his claim, I contend that even though this consolation is denied to the reader, he or she is left with an anticipation of a future which will enact concrete, utopian change uplifting queer and minoritized lives. As readers, we can assume that this perceived future will be carved by the political action of the daughters of today such as Zainab and Udaya Jebeen, in particular, who "would settle the accounts and square the books" (Roy 2017, 219).

Conclusion

Even though queer motherhood is an underemphasized area within South Asian studies, one has to acknowledge that mainstream discourses around womanhood and motherhood are beginning to accommodate and accurately reflect the new and emerging multidimensional realities of social and political life in India. One notable example of this is the 2017 commercial for Vicks VapoRub which features hijra mother Gauri Sawant and her adopted daughter Gayatri, both of whom I had referenced in the earlier sections of this article. The advertisement (produced by Procter and Gamble in collaboration with Publicis Singapore) made quite a splash when it first made its way to Indian television channels and Youtube (Edelman 2004; Gauri, Gayatri, and the Vicks Ad 2017; Vicks India 2017). Conventionally, Vicks VapoRub advertisements depict cisgendered mothers - primarily home-makers - caring for their sick children through the night, massaging their foreheads using the Vicks VapoRub ointment[9]. Thus, the very fact that a hijra mother and her valuable motherwork could be featured in such a commercial along with her adopted daughter is an indicator of the changing landscape of LGBTQI rights in India and the steadily evolving notions of family and kinship. The 2018 landmark judgment on the scrapping of section 377 of the Indian Penal Code[10] and the 2014 judgment on the legal recognition given to the term "third gender"[11] are significant victories but this journey toward greater rights for India's significantly-sized queer identified population has a lot more ground to cover. We can consider portraits of motherhood in Roy's novel and in the Vicks commercial as components of this same important, ongoing political journey. The carefully constructed nature of Anjum and Tilo's character arcs not only upends archetypal representations of the reticent, Indian woman but also demonstrates how alternative networks of family can nurture the lives of discarded girl children in India and usher in hope for a truly utopian future.

Notes

1. See *The New York Times* article in the list references to learn more about the Hijra community's struggles in modern day India and particularly about the lives of Hijra sex-workers living in Mumbai (Hylton, Gettleman, and Lyons 2018).

2. Azadi means "freedom" or "independence" in the Urdu language.
3. Roy satirically uses the term "surplus people" here to indicate the apathy of the administration toward the deprived sections of India's urban populations.
4. I use the term "heterosexual unions" here to also include instances of abnormal, violent, and non-consensual heterosexuality such as Revathy's brutal gangrape at the hands of six police officers.
5. Roy references the near-relentless battle being waged between the Maoist-Naxalites against the Indian state here through Revathy's arc. This conflict primarily involves the revolutionary guerilla member-fighters of the Communist Party of India (Maoist) and the Indian government. As per an article published in The Economist in 2006, it is implied that Maoist insurgency envelopes some 170 of India's 602 districts. An area known as the "Red Corridor" extending across large swathes of northern, central, and southern India encompassing parts of states such as Chhattisgarh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh is primarily designated as the region caught in the grip of Naxalite "insurgency" (The Economist 2006). Chandrahas Choudhury's review of Arundhati Roy's *Walking with the Comrades* in *The Washington Post* which touches on this bitter war between the two sides describes it as a "battle over power, land, ideology, mineral riches, rights, ecology". Roy herself prefers to see this prolonged skirmish as a battle for the "soul of India" (Choudhury 2011).
6. The word "udaya" means "sunrise" in Telugu (native language of the residents of the state of Andhra Pradesh in India) which is mentioned on page 423 in the novel. The baby's name also reinforces my claim about the emergence of a new dawn or a queer feminist future that is powerfully implied through her survival against all odds.
7. Ina Goel's article on hijra motherhood discusses "hijra panchayats or jamaats" that are allowed to make a decision on the proposed adoption of teenagers who want to become members of the hijra communities. However, this is largely an informal social system that has no legal sanction or approval. Goel also mentions that there is no information regarding adoption by members of the "third gender" available on the website for the Central Adoption Resource Authority (CARA) which is an arm of the Ministry of Women and Child Development in India (Goel 2018).
8. The violent religious riots in Gujarat in 2002 killed almost 1000 Muslims and some 20,000 Muslim homes and businesses were destroyed (*The New York Times* 2014).
9. The ointment is a very popular and common remedy for relieving nasal congestion and treating colds in India.
10. On 6th September, 2018, a Constitution bench of the Supreme Court of India scrapped the infamous and highly contentious section 377 of the Indian Penal Code which criminalized all "unnatural sex" between consenting adults and which was specifically used as an instrument of oppression against all queer-identified individuals in India for more than a hundred years. See *The Wire* article in list of references for more information on this subject (The Wire Staff 2018).
11. On April 15, 2014, the Supreme Court of India (National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India) in a groundbreaking judgment bestowed legal sanction on the use of the term "third gender" for individuals who neither identify as male nor female. This gave the right to India's nearly 2 million transgender population to self-identify for the first time. See the BBC article in list of references for more information on this subject (*BBC News* 2014).

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Notes on contributor

Samadrita Kuiti is a PhD candidate in the English Department at the University of Connecticut-Storrs. Her dissertation investigates the political possibilities in the depiction of feminist and queer utopian impulses within postcolonial works of literatures from South Asia and Afrofuturist and African speculative fiction. She teaches postcolonial and Anglophone literatures, feminist and queer theories, and utopian studies. She serves as the current Communications Director for the Northeast Modern Language Association's (NeMLA) Graduate Student Caucus.

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