

The Algebra of Anger.
Social Oppression and Queer Intersectionality in *Funny Boy* and *The Ministry of
Utmost Happiness*

Abstract: This article compares Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* (1994) with Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) in order to describe the processes of discrimination against queer people within a strained social fabric marked by familial, ethnic, and class oppressions. Through Pankaj Mishra's theory of anger in capitalist societies, Hannah Arendt's concept of negative solidarity, and Kimberlé Crenshaw's notion of queer intersectionality, this paper examines how the two novels situate their queer characters' quest for sexual identity and self-affirmation against the backdrop of the neoliberal expansion of the Indian subcontinent at the turn of the 20th century into the present. Such process increased social inequalities, exacerbated class tensions, and pre-existing ethno-religious conflicts, producing interlocking systems of repression in which queer subjectivities face various forms of physical and psychological discrimination, as existential anger and the threat of violence either force them to painful separations or to rebuild new social relationships.

Keywords: *class discrimination, ethnic conflict, negative solidarity, paranoia, queer intersectionality*

1. Incidence of Social Discontent on the Formation of Negative Solidarities

The purpose of this essay is to trace a critical comparison between Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* (1994) and Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017). The first novel describes the teenage years of Arjie Chelvaratnam, an upper-class Tamil boy in Sri Lanka, and the discovery of his own homosexuality during the escalating conflict between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamils in the 1970s and 1980s. In the second, we meet Anjum, a Muslim hijra who, at 46 and in extreme poverty, is faced with the challenge of raising a child in India at the beginning of the new millennium, still consumed by religious hatreds. The novels feature two very different characters, each with their own age, nationality, religious belief, sexual orientation and social standing. Drawing on a theoretical framework that combines Hannah Arendt's concept of 'negative solidarity',¹ with Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw's idea of intersectionality,² I will discuss how discrimination against queer people in the two novels confronts and informs other modes of oppression driven by fear and social resentment at intercommunal and (trans)national levels, sometimes in seemingly contradictory ways. In the final part, I also analyse how sometimes these alliances express the desire to attain enfranchisement or escape social inequalities in order to ensure one's safety, pursue one's ambitions or well-being.

In *Age of Anger: A History of the Present*, Pankaj Mishra suggests that industrial societies have ushered in a globalised, competitive market-oriented economy that promises fulfilment for all while leaving large segments of the population without jobs or employed in unsatisfying occupations.³ In a world where everyone wages war against each other, most people are doomed to suffer failure, loss, and defeat, or, as Christopher Bayly (drawing on Marx) wrote in *The Birth of the Modern World*, they

¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* [1951], new edition with added prefaces (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1973).

² Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color", *Stanford Law Review*, 43.6 (1991), 1241-1299.

³ Pankaj Mishra, *Age of Anger: A History of the Present* (London: Penguin, 2017).

are reduced to “long-term losers in the scramble for resources and dignity”.⁴ Exacerbating poverty and misery creates a context in which human relations are dominated by what Herzl⁵ called Darwinian mimicry and René Girard⁶ mimetic desire: a persistent state of dissatisfaction fuelled by the insatiable appetite to possess what others have, because if other people want it, it might be something worth pursuing. Such appropriative mimicry is the hallmark of those whom Nietzsche called men of *ressentiment*: “the worms of revenge and rancour [who spin] the web of the most wicked conspiracy ... against those who are successful and victorious”.⁷ This is a humanity sick with envy and chronic discontent, obsessed by the opinions of others and conformity to societal expectations, cloaked in deference, while hiding deep-seated grudges against higher social strata or the wealthy. In short, resentment in the modern age reflects the desire for convergence and similarity rather than differences in theology, culture, or ideology.

Mishra perceives this phenomenon of generalised anger as an unrecognised civil Third World War. Resentments within civil society contribute to the decay of its fabric through the erosion of democratic values, creating fertile ground for chauvinism and authoritarianism. Mishra notes that Dostoevsky was one of the first intellectuals to denounce that, in a system of industrial competition, the fallacious notions of sovereignty and personal freedom can be a source of murderous paranoia. Economic hardship, the suspicion that one’s suffering is the result of a ruling class that thrives on pain, and the fear of rejection and annihilation, all combine into a toxic mixture that allows barkers and false prophets to unite people, especially young men, against scapegoats.⁸ According to René Girard, scapegoats are often created by people who, caught in a kind of “blindness”,⁹ try by all means to find a way out of a difficult situation. The point is to find a liberating target on which to hurl violence. It does not matter whether the victim is actually at fault. Mishra further adds that the oppression of a scapegoat is to be enforced, among other purposes, in order to conquer new space or territories upon which to build a more fulfilling existence, a practice that frequently relies on appeals to enhance masculinity. He describes how, for example, many of the young men recruited for the Italian expansion in Libya and Ethiopia in the first half of the twentieth century were attracted by the calls to affirm manhood and the opportunities for conquest it offered as a chance to end a life of frustration and begin a new existence of ‘justice’ and ‘honesty’. Indeed, a common motivation for violent mass movements is the utopian impulse to rebuild society and state power.

Mishra borrows the phrase ‘negative solidarity’ from Hannah Arendt to describe the anomalous closeness (exacerbated by the global information network) that binds groups of people with unequal power, wealth, and rights together, increasing the likelihood that they will feel jealousy or resentment, and consequently desire to commit violence against the groups they blame for their suffering. Arendt first used this phrase in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* to describe the sentiment against the status quo shared by the “competitive and acquisitive society of the bourgeoisie”¹⁰ of pre-Nazi Germany. Angry at existing institutions and feeling that civil responsibility was only “a needless drain on [their] limited time and energy”, these people invoked the strong man, a leader who “tak[ing] upon himself the troublesome responsibility for the conduct of public affairs”,¹¹ would enable them to pursue “a way ...

⁴ Christopher Alan Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Malden: Blackwell, 2004), 119.

⁵ Theodor Herzl, *The Jews’ State: A Critical English Translation* [1896] (e.v., Jason Aronson, 1997). Here and further on, ‘e.v.’ stands for ‘electronic version’. As with most electronic versions of books, the reference has no place of publication.

⁶ René Girard, “The Plague in Literature and Myth”, *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 15.5 (1974), 833-850. See also, James G. Williams, ed., *The Girard Reader* (New York: The Crossroads Publishing Company, 2000).

⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* [1887], ed. by Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. by Carol Diethe (New York: Cambridge U.P., 2006).

⁸ René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. by Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U.P., 1989).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁰ Arendt, *The Age of Totalitarianism*, 313.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

of life ... insistently and exclusively centered on the individual's success or failure in ruthless competition".¹² According to Arendt, this "self-centered bitterness"¹³ paradoxically led to a more cynical, selfless attitude toward death, the sense that one does not count as an individual but merely as an embodiment of a collective phenomenon. Mishra believes that societies built on financial competition and personal profit create in the modern world the conditions for falling into the compulsive aggregations and nihilistic violence that Arendt identified in Europe in the first half of the 20th century. Negative solidarity, thus understood, sees people united in collective fear and social discontent.

In "Karl Jaspers: Citizen of the World?"¹⁴ Arendt uses this phrase a second time to express the dread that unites the peoples of all walks of life against the threat of nuclear weapons that could wipe out humanity. As this kind of solidarity brings together people in the face of collective self-destruction, it also fosters a desire for isolation and separation due to the excruciating political responsibility it entails:

This negative solidarity, based on the fear of global destruction, has its correspondence in a less articulate, but no less potent, apprehension that the solidarity of mankind can be meaningful in a positive sense only if it is coupled with political responsibility. Our political concepts, according to which we have to assume responsibility for all public affairs within our reach regardless of personal 'guilt,' because we are held responsible as citizens for everything that our government does in the name of the country, may lead us into an intolerable situation of global responsibility. The solidarity of mankind may well turn out to be an unbearable burden, and it is not surprising that the common reactions to it are political apathy, isolationist nationalism, or desperate rebellion against all powers that be rather than enthusiasm or a desire for a revival of humanism.¹⁵

Arendt's concept of negative solidarity provides a remarkably sharp analytical tool for examining how much both novels have in common, as they allow to identify the "structure of feeling"¹⁶ underlying the relationships that form or break down around the two main characters, often in fear and resentment. Both Arjie and Anjum must explore their 'anomalous' sexuality in two nearly contiguous historical periods linked by the neoliberal momentum that, sweeping across the entire sub-continent on the impetus of free market competition, was simultaneously repositing or accentuating patriarchal oppression in kinship relations, ethno-religious conflicts, paranoid anxiety about being victimised by hidden forces, class and caste inequalities, and, more generally, the contradictory antagonisms that British colonial domination had left on the land.

2. Queerness, Kinship and the False Promises of Globalisation

While José Santiago Fernández Vázquez¹⁷ notes that the premise of Arjie's story may not be particularly original, since depicting bloody wars for territorial and cultural dominance through the eyes of children has become quite a popular trope in postcolonial literature, in *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*, Gayatri Gopinath asserts that *Funny Boy* "lays out

¹² Ibid. This was also true of the unemployed who attributed the failure of their own lives to social inequity.

¹³ Ibid., 315.

¹⁴ Hannah Arendt, "Karl Jaspers: Citizen of the World?" [1959], in Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1968), 81-94.

¹⁵ Ibid., 83.

¹⁶ The expression comes from Raymond Williams, "From Preface to Film", in Raymond Williams and Michael Orrom, eds., *Preface to Film* (London: Film Drama Limited, 1954). The concept would be later developed, among others, by Fredrich Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke U.P., 1991); *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (e.v., Cornell U.P., 2015).

¹⁷ José Santiago Fernández Vázquez, "The Quest for Personal and National Identity in Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*", *Commonwealth: Essays and Studies*, 24.1 (Autumn 2001), 103-117.

the complex system of prohibition, punishment, and compulsion that governs and structures gender differentiation¹⁸ in the conflicted environments of South Asian countries, during the years of market deregulation initiatives several decades after independence from European rule. In *Funny Boy*, we see how the general liberalisation process of the Indian subcontinent impacted the social and economic fabric of Sri Lanka. Arjie feels that there is “something new in [their] lives”.¹⁹ After the collapse of socialism, the government had embraced the free market, leading to greater financial prosperity for his family. The inauguration of Sri Lanka’s first American-style supermarket coincides with the proliferation of restaurants springing up across the country and offering ‘exotic food’ like hamburgers. In *Ministry*, we also see India preparing to become “the world’s favourite new superpower”²⁰ as it opened its economy to foreign investment. In Delhi, several billboards bearing the words ‘our time is now’ announced the arrival of Kmart and Starbucks. However, the promise of a more fulfilling life was made as “sleeping bodies of homeless people lined their high, narrow pavements, head to toe ... looping into the distance”.²¹ The stark contrast between the prospect of a prosperous life and the arid terrain of utter destitution leads Roy to conclude that “it was the summer Grandma became a whore”.²² In other words, the nation was behaving like an ageing, suffering woman who pretended to forego her problems in order to compete in the marketplace. Despite the triumphant glitz and glamour advertising of the new India of globalisation, the poor, the so-called surplus population, were being evicted from their precarious housing. The police were dispatched to the slums, but they met resistance from the residents, who stood armed at their doorsteps. Sometimes the policemen were forced to withdraw merely because “there were too many of them to be killed outright”,²³ and not due to concern for their lives. In India, the process of urban cleansing was not a novel phenomenon. It was also one of the fundamental tenets of Sanjay Gandhi during the Emergency of the mid-seventies, when people were crushed to death in their homes by bulldozers in the middle of the night so that cities could become more ‘beautiful’.²⁴ The world of both novels, especially Roy’s, is made up of outcasts, people considered by the upper class to be the refuse of society, at a time of political turmoil and economic liberalisation when India was developing into one of the world’s fastest growing economies. These are people who are rejected or disregarded, who suffer from poverty, and are on the verge of extinction.²⁵

Love is generally defeated in these works. This is true whether the love is homo- or heterosexual. In *The Ministry of the Utmost Happiness*, mysterious Tilo is in love with Musa, with whom she has a relationship but is eventually killed after he joins the Kashmir struggle for independence. Musa, for his part, sees his wife and daughter slaughtered by a gunshot.²⁶ In *Funny Boy*, Radha is in love with Anil, a Sinhalese man who harbours feelings for her but is rejected by her family’s rancour toward his ethnic group, since Radha’s grandfather had been killed in a Sinhalese attack on Tamils twenty years before. Also, if she turns against her family, Radha is at risk of rejection just like Doris, the Burgher woman in

¹⁸ Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham and London: Duke U.P., 2005), 170.

¹⁹ Shyam Selvadurai, *Funny Boy* [1994] (London: Vintage, 1995), 107.

²⁰ Arundhati Roy, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (e.v., Penguin, Random House, 2017), 104. This reference has no place of publication as it refers to the digital version available on the Google Play Store.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 106.

²⁴ During Indira Gandhi’s tenure as prime minister, she declared a state of emergency to prevent the country from being ruined by a corrupt political class. In reality, Indira suppressed civil liberties, restricted free expression, and used violence against those she considered her political enemies (and thus inimical to the national interest she believed she represented). The political programme of the state of emergency was laid out in a 20-point plan, to which Indira’s son Sanjay added five more points. Sanjay’s main concern was to beautify the environment by razing as many slums as possible and sterilising the poorer sections of society to prevent overpopulation.

²⁵ Lisa Lau and Ana Cristina Mendes, “Romancing the Other: Arundhati Roy’s *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*”, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 57.1 (March 2022), 102-117.

²⁶ They were killed by the same bullet which penetrated the mother’s heart after piercing her daughter’s temple.

charge of a play in which both Arjie and Radha appear, had been. Doris had turned against her English-born family by marrying a Tamil man, and they later abandoned her. In her own words, Radha acknowledges that she became aware of her feelings for Anil in response to the family's opposition to a possible 'mixed' marriage.²⁷ Before marrying Arjie's father, when the laws still forbade interethnic marriages, Amma was in love with Daryl, a white man who was forced to leave her and emigrate to Australia when the government imposed Sinhala as the only official language, which he did not speak. Arjie's father himself had considered marrying an English girl, who reciprocated his feelings, before he "came to his senses [and] realized, [she] would never fit in with his family. Also, she was from a working-class family, and 'low class was low class whether it was English or Sri Lankan'".²⁸ Roy dedicates her novel to the unconsolated in a world ravaged by social inequalities and discrimination. Its epigraph reads "it's all a matter of your heart",²⁹ indicating the importance of emotions at all levels. When asked who these unconsolated may be, Roy replied, "All of us, in secret, even if we don't show it... I think the world is unconsolated right now".³⁰ According to Filippo Menozzi,³¹ Roy's writing is infused with an aesthetic of the inconsolable as it takes into consideration emotional leftovers that are largely overlooked in historiographies and political accounts.

As the examples above show, class distinctions and ethno-religious barriers underlie the 'residual' nature of the often unhappy unions that make up the nuclear family, a heteronormative structure that is the pillar of capitalist society. It is against this backdrop of sentimental contradictions that we follow Anjum's path to emancipation. Anjum was born with two sexes, a fully developed male member and a still developing vagina. Her mother, Jahanara, was so distressed upon this discovery that she considered killing both herself and her daughter. In Urdu, everything is assigned a specific gender. Her child had two of them in one body, which in the maths of a patriarchal culture was equivalent to having none. To the world her child would be a hijra, a "clown without a circus"³² or a "queen without a palace".³³ She belonged to a liminal, mostly indeterminate realm that excluded her from all the different kinds of blood relationships that make up a patriarchal family. Overcome by despair, she takes the child to the shrine of Hazrat Sarmad Shaheed. In doing so, she comes into contact with "strange people ... the kind of people who in her earlier life she would not have deigned to even glance at unless they'd crossed her path. Suddenly they seemed to be the most important people in the world".³⁴ Her daughter's condition brings her closer to the disenfranchised humanity she would have otherwise ignored if the child had been born with a defined gender, and for whom she now feels an enormous sense of empathy. Upon learning of Anjum's double sex, her father Mulaqat Ali, a beverage merchant whose business had declined due to the spread of Coca-Cola in his country, unsuccessfully tries to bolster her masculine side by telling her of the ancestral exploits that are part of the family tree, which he boasts can be traced back to the Mongol emperor Changez Khan. There is no doubt that Anjum's dubious sexuality challenged this dynastic inheritance and made her run the risk of finding no place in it. Therefore Mulaqat, who believed that the power of medicine in the "modern era"³⁵ could

²⁷ "The funny thing", she remarks to the boy whom circumstances had also made funny, "I never saw him in that light until Amma ... talked to his parents that I began to see him differently" (Roy, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, 6).

²⁸ Selvadurai, *Funny Boy*, 170.

²⁹ Roy, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, 84.

³⁰ This quote comes from an interview Roy gave to Emy Goodman and Nermeen Shaikh in 2017. It is available online at www.democracynow.org/2017/6/20/full_extended_interview_arundhati_roy_on.

³¹ Filippo Menozzi, "'Too Much Blood for Good Literature': Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* and the Question of Realism", *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 55.1 (2018), 20-33.

³² *Ibid.*, 20.

³³ Roy, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, 8.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

cure his ‘son’, brings Anjum to Dr. Ghulam Nabi, who recommended a surgeon to seal her “girl-part”,³⁶ but warned that the feminine tendencies, which he called ‘fitrat’, would likely remain.

Arjie in *Funny Boy* is also subjected to virilization measures. A memory from his childhood illustrates the threat of familial dissolution which fear of homosexuality usually brings with it. The episode comes from the time when his parents³⁷ and uncles took all the children to their grandparents’ house on Sundays for one of their typical family spend-the-day, during which the children were almost completely free to pursue their favourite activities. Arjie enjoyed participating in the bride-ride game, where he could play the role of the bride, instead of playing cricket with the boys. For this, however, Arjie is first insulted by his cousin Tanuja, who calls him a “pansy”, a “faggot”, and a “sissy”³⁸ and when he is caught by his parents the family unity is in danger of breaking down. Appa, his father, accuses his mother, Amma, of evoking strange fantasies in her son because she allows him to watch her put on makeup. In the future, Arjie will not be allowed to do that and will also be required to play with his male cousins. In another scene, Appa, concerned about his son’s “certain tendencies”,³⁹ asks the muscular and virile Jegan, the son of a childhood friend, for assistance in overcoming them. Arjie is also enrolled at the Queen Victoria Academy because it “will force [him] to become a man”.⁴⁰ The nature of the masculinization attempts Arjie and Anjum face provide insight into the deep fear of extinction that Edward A. Ross⁴¹ termed ‘race suicide’, and situate the question of queer sexuality within the complex framework of kinship ties within patriarchal societies.

Michel Foucault⁴² distinguished the ability to freely enjoy one’s own body (what he referred to as ‘regime of sexuality’) from the laws that govern marriage and lineage in order to pass on wealth, property, and, more generally, inheritance (‘regime of alliance’).⁴³ Elizabeth Freeman⁴⁴ argues in “Queer Belongings: Kinship Theory and Queer Theory”, that kinship ties are regulated by policies that sanction a variety of lived relationship forms centred on heterosexual couples and extending to children. These policies provide economic and other material benefits, but they also impose obligations on all who are classified as family members. In dyadic systems of dynastic succession, the presence of gay and lesbian individuals introduces a logistical challenge for family policy and ethnographic mapping. In the words of Chrysanthi Nigianni and Merl Storr: “queer is always already in response to a dominant heterosexual matrix: a solely reactive force of re-signification, mockery, disrespect to the dominance of heterosexuality, to the power of the norms”.⁴⁵ In *Undoing Gender* Judith Butler⁴⁶ questions whether kinship is necessarily bound to heterosexual language and whether homosexuality or queer sexuality must necessarily elude or resist it. It is observed that the problem with queer subjects, and more generally, with members of a sexual orientation not intended for reproduction, is that they do have names, but those names belong to a dominant lexicon that tries to

³⁶ Ibid., 22.

³⁷ Arjie’s family is from the Tamil minority, descendants of contract workers imported from India by the British who were used as slave-like labourers for the cultivation of tea.

³⁸ Selvadurai, *Funny Boy*, 17.

³⁹ Ibid., 172.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 216.

⁴¹ Edward A. Ross, “The Cause of Race Superiority”, *Annals of the American Academy of Political & Social Sciences*, 18 (1901), 67-89.

⁴² Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality vol. 1: An Introduction* [1976], trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

⁴³ Because of this, Foucault also relates family and sexuality to society’s distribution of wealth and capital.

⁴⁴ Elizabeth Freeman, “Queer Belongings: Kinship Theory and Queer Theory”, in George E. Haggerty and Molly McGarry, eds., *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies* (Maldon, Oxford, Carlton: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 295-314.

⁴⁵ Chrysanthi Nigianni and Merl Storr, “... So As to Know ‘Us’ Better Deleuze and Queer Theory: Two Theories, One Concept – One Book, Many Authors ...”, in Chrysanthi Nigianni and Merl Storr, *Deleuze and Queer Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh U.P., 2009), 1-10, 4.

⁴⁶ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

assimilate them into heteronormatively understood families. Consequently, they are either ‘naturally’ adapted to family relationships with a mother, a father, and a child, or they are excluded from them.

Elizabeth Freeman argues that this linguistic inadequacy is a consequence of the fact that the queer family is seen as lacking ‘extensibility’.⁴⁷ In cultural systems that view the family as a unit capable of producing and reproducing offspring, the problem with queer sexuality is that it does not provide those ‘elementary structures’, as Claude Lévi-Strauss⁴⁸ describes them, of kinship and consanguinity capable of multiplying across space, through a network of family chains, or extending over time through descent. As a result, queer minorities “collapse into amorphous and generic ‘community,’ while queer ‘descent groups’ seem for the most part linguistically inconceivable”.⁴⁹ They are forced to vacillate between individualistic self-identifications and abstractly romanticised notions of community subordinated to national values. In considering the meaning of queerness from this perspective, it is crucial therefore that we take into account how small-scale kinship ties are connected to the larger social formations based on nationality and ethnicity from which they derive their legitimacy, acquire meaning, and become thinkable, to use a term cherished by Foucault.

3. Intersectionality and the Maths of Fear

In “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color”, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw describes structural intersectionality in terms of interlocking systems that enable discrimination. Repression against sexual orientations outside the ‘norm’ cannot be viewed in isolation, but must be seen in conjunction with other forms of discrimination related to kinship, class, race, religion and nationalism. We can only understand the long-term effects of discrimination against queer people within the context of a continuum of patterns that connect and separate different social and cultural domains. Because queer intersectionality addresses oppression as a structure of mutually reinforcing discriminations, it can provide refined critical inquiry tools and methodologies that account for the complexity of the connections between them. This argument was made by Eithne Lubhéid in her introduction to *Queer Migrations: Sexuality, US Citizenship, and Border Crossing*, in which she writes that “the importance of understanding the intersectionality of race and gender has opened up space in turn to ask how sexuality might also intersect with multiple categories of identification and difference”.⁵⁰

Given her sexuality, Anjum will naturally want to separate from her biological family and find one in which she can truly be herself. Khwabgah (literally, the house of dreams) is a place where only hijras live and where she can express her individuality in ways she could never have imagined before. Her mother initially asks her not to go, but when she refuses, they agree to meet occasionally at the shrine of Hazrat Sarmad Shaheed, while her father cuts all ties with her out of shame. The hijras are expected to abandon their biological ties when they join the larger hijra community, which is distinguished by a unique degree of solidarity, different from that of other social outcasts. Unlike ‘normal people’ who worry about poverty, gender inequality, religious conflicts, and national wars, the hijra community is united by an intractable unhappiness: “think about it,” her friend Nimmo bemoans, “what are the things ... normal people get unhappy about? ... Price-rise, children’s school-admissions, husbands’ beatings, wives’ cheatings, Hindu-Muslim riots, Indo-Pak war — outside things that settle down eventually. But for us [this is] all inside us.... The war is inside us. It will never settle down”.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Freeman, “Queer Belongings”, 297.

⁴⁸ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* [1967], revised edition, trans. by James Harle Bell and John Richard von Sturmer (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969).

⁴⁹ Freeman, “Queer Belongings”, 297.

⁵⁰ Eithne Lubhéid, “Introduction: Queering Migration and Citizenship”, in Eithne Lubhéid and Lionel Cantú, eds., *Queer Migrations: Sexuality, US Citizenship, and Border Crossings* (Minneapolis: University Press of Minnesota, 2005), xxiv.

⁵¹ Roy, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, 29.

In the years that follow, Anjum grows up to become the most famous hijra in Delhi. She undergoes a series of physical changes, including surgery to remove her penis⁵² and taking drugs that give her voice “a peculiar, rasping quality, which sometimes sounded like two voices quarrelling with each other instead of one”.⁵³

In time, however, Anjum develops a crescent sense of unease mixed with frustration at Khwabgah, which she poignantly conveys through her completely irrational fear that Saeeda may have cursed Zainab, Anjum’s unofficially adopted child who is infected with malaria. Saeeda is another member of Khwabgah, younger and more educated than her, who alternates between wearing traditional Indian clothing and western style garments. Indeed, Saeeda is not only part of Khwabgah, but has also become more westernised: she prefers to “speak in the new language”⁵⁴ of the globalised world and refers to herself as a “transperson”⁵⁵ rather than a hijra. Saeeda competes with Anjum for the leadership of Khwabgah and is “second in line for Zainab’s affections”.⁵⁶ As Zainab grows increasingly ill, Anjum builds up an all-embracing, “mounting paranoia”⁵⁷ for which Saeeda is made the scapegoat. Anjum believes that Saeeda has cast some kind of spell responsible both for Zainab’s sickness and the attack on the Twin Towers, which she watches with horror on live television. In her view, “the hex that had been put on Zainab had made the whole world sick”.⁵⁸ Anjum’s paranoia, her irrational fear of a culturally ‘mixed’ Muslim threatening her primary position in Zainab’s and other hijras’ hearts, thus illustrates the otherwise unsuspectable connection between queerness and cultural tensions as they exist between East and West, between Muslims and Hindus, similar, the author observes, to how the then Indian Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, used 9/11 to attack Muslims by exploiting baseless fears of Islamic communities in his country, even though they had nothing to do with the New York attacks: “‘The Mussalman, he doesn’t like the Other,’ he said poetically in Hindi, and paused for a long time, even by his own standards. ‘His Faith he wants to spread through Terror’”.⁵⁹ The rivalry between Anjum, the traditional hijra, and Saeeda, the transgender woman who is open to internationalisation and eager to learn the language of the foreigners, produces an envy that is directly contrasted with the feelings of anger against Muslims across the country at a time of perceived vulnerability. The September 11 attack on the Twin Towers led to increased persecution of Muslim communities around the world, which in the case of India strengthened the political position of those who wanted to turn the country into a Hindu republic.

4. Ethno-Religious Warfare

In their introduction to “What’s Queer about Queer Studies Now?”, David Eng, Judith Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz complain that queer studies has “rarely addressed ... broad social concerns”, and has hardly embedded its analyses in the broader context of global crises that have shaped configurations “among political economies, the geopolitics of war and terror, and national manifestations of sexual, racial and gendered hierarchies”.⁶⁰ By placing her story at the intersection of issues of ethnic-religious conflicts, kinship, and gender imbalances, Roy demonstrates the timeliness of the call and invites critical reflection in that direction. This is a text that simultaneously reveals the

⁵² It is common for hijras to have their genitals removed and to be sexually passive. Therefore, not only can they not commit sexual assault, but they also have no reproductive abilities.

⁵³ Roy, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, 34.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁶⁰ David L. Eng et al., eds., “Introduction: What’s Queer about Queer Studies Now?”, in *Social Text*, 23.3-4 (Fall-Winter 2005), 1-24.

systems of power from which particular alliance formations or rivalries emerge, but also how they spread to other communities with which they do not seem directly connected. As Nathaline Reynolds reports,⁶¹ the Indian government grew increasingly callous to issues of social injustice and began accusing its opponents of disloyalty. In the nation that was home to the world's third-largest Muslim population after Indonesia and Pakistan, Hindu elites claimed that Islam posed one of the greatest threats to democracy. Islamists were considered violent and inclined to subjugate their neighbours. Nisha Kapoor⁶² has explained how this climate reinforced Muslims' perception of being victims of injustice, hindered their social integration, and triggered a widespread identity crisis, which in turn led many young men to join radical Islamic groups. Discrimination against Muslims contributed immensely to inflaming tempers, setting in motion a spiral of outrage and accusations in which each party blamed its own actions for the other side's crimes. All parties were victims and never perpetrators.

This is clear from Roy's account of Anjum's involvement in the Gujarat reprisals. One day, sixty Hindu visitors were burned alive in a bus set ablaze on the site where the Babri Masjid mosque had been demolished ten years earlier.⁶³ In revenge, Hindus began slaughtering Muslims everywhere, in the streets, in their homes, and even in hospitals. According to unofficial government sources, each action would be met with an equal and opposite reaction. In reality, "the 'reaction' ... was neither equal nor opposite".⁶⁴ The acts of revenge were always worse than the insult suffered. Although Roy points out that the Babri Masjid, a mosque built 450 years earlier by Mughal emperor Babur in the northern Indian city of Ayodhya, was demolished by Hindu fundamentalists to make room for the construction of a Hindu temple, it is nonetheless noteworthy that the mosque itself was built on the site of an earlier Hindu temple destroyed to make way for the mosque. Indeed, Robert Layton and Julian Thomas⁶⁵ recall that the mosque stood on the foundations of an earlier Hindu temple that marked the birthplace of the legendary hero king Rama. This mosque had been disputed since the 19th century, to the point where it was 'desecrated' in 1949 with Hindu imagery inside. It was closed and remained unused until it was eventually demolished 42 years later. The devastation of sacred places of worship is perceived as a way to erase a community's past, which is why it can become a cause for retribution. The climate of tension between Hindus and Muslims is reflected in the escalation of reprisals, which were always intended as a reaction to violence previously experienced.

Therein lies the irrational maths of fear that crosses borders and community boundaries. In her article "The Algebra of Infinite Justice",⁶⁶ Roy describes the anger of Americans after 9/11, which she calls reflexive because it was a reaction to the instinctive feeling of revenge that triggered it. "Stygian"⁶⁷ anger and feelings of revenge reinforced each other, creating a "lockpick"⁶⁸ capable of "slipping"⁶⁹ unnoticed through all walls and boundaries, whether material or social. In Roy's analysis, it was precisely this kind of anger that led to the unlikely negative solidarity between the United States and Russia in the fight against an already devastated Afghanistan. Using unlikely equations, this kind of solidarity can extract "collateral value"⁷⁰ from violence for retaliation or preemptive purposes. In

⁶¹ Nathaline Reynolds, "Hindu Nationalism and the Muslim Minority in India", *Corridors of Knowledge for Peace and Development* (Lahore: Sang-E-Meel Publications, 2020), 279-303.

⁶² Nisha Kapoor, *Deport, Deprive, Extradite: 21st Century State Extremism* (e.v., Verso, 2018).

⁶³ The exact date is 6 December 1992.

⁶⁴ Roy, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, 52.

⁶⁵ Robert Layton and Julian Thomas, "Introduction: The Destruction and Conservation of Cultural Property", in Robert Layton et al., eds., *Destruction and Conservation of Cultural Property* (London & New York: Routledge, 2001).

⁶⁶ Arundhati Roy, "The Algebra of Infinite Justice", *The Guardian* (2001), www.theguardian.com.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

the case of 9/11, revenge for the tragic deaths of 7,000 people could justify the slaughter of hundreds of thousands or even millions of others.

5. Unseen Enemies

Extraction of collateral value is possible also because, in addition to centralised fear generated by a specific enemy, in our times there is also a pervasive panic, the sense reinforced by the mass media of living in a world out of control, where any disaster can strike anyone at any time. In “Dead Certainty: Ethnic Violence in the Era of Globalization”,⁷¹ Arjun Appadurai discusses the distress of living in neglected cities where it is not uncommon to die unexpectedly from being hit by a piece of plaster falling from the cornice of a building. Or consider Geetanjali Shree, whose novel *The Empty Space*⁷² expresses the apprehension of suddenly becoming the victim of a terrorist attack. To Shree, such subcutaneous unease is not limited to the Indian subcontinent, but is now universal and affects the whole world: “The specificity of the event ... unhinged the lives of the bereaved family and their friends overnight. Such a calamity can strike anywhere, anytime, we felt. It brought home to me the horror of our contemporary world where stupid and sinister violence is a quotidian reality”.⁷³ Confronted with unintelligible catastrophes, emotions such as distrust seem to be the most effective means of conflict management.

This is especially true of *Funny Boy*. The family’s hostility to Radha and Anil’s union is reinforced by the climate of fear created by the spread of horrific news on the radio. As Mishra correctly noted, in the age of anger “grisly images and sounds continuously assault us”.⁷⁴ The final section of the novel consists of accounts from Arjie’s diary. A clash between the Tamil Tigers and government soldiers serves as justification for a series of punitive measures against the Tamils, whose homes are later set on fire. The most disturbing aspect of this situation is not the violence itself, but the impression that it is being secretly manipulated by the government with the support of the military. The police are not on duty in the streets, and telephone communications have been cut off. Rumour has it that the government itself is passing out voting lists so that angry mobs know exactly which houses to loot and burn down. Arjie’s family feels hunted by an invisible predator whose existence they cannot prove. They only know that it is there and that sooner or later it will strike through the unbridled hatred of the crowd. They can only rely on terrifying rumours and the macabre images evoked by the reports on the radio. Selvadurai reminds readers that evil is most fearsome when it is unpredictable.

When Radha returns from Jaffna, the city to which her family had sent her so that she could not meet Anil secretly, she is assaulted in a train attack by Sri Lankans. Many of the ‘ethnic’ trains that transported Tamils from the north of the island to the south, where the majority Sinhalese lived, were attacked during the years preceding the civil war, sometimes resulting in certain rail lines being shut down. Radha returns home, however, and her behaviour makes it clear that the violence she witnessed has left the deepest wound, not the bruise on her face, and Arjie realises that the unrest, which he previously thought was far away, is actually threatening him more closely than he had anticipated:

The recent riots, which had seemed so removed from my life took on an immediate and frightening dimension.... Slowly, the news about what was happening in other parts of the country had begun to come into Colombo. The things we heard were so terrible that everyone had been sure there would be a forty-eight-hour curfew, and people had rushed to the shops to stock up on provisions.... What seemed disturbing, now that I thought about those 1981 riots, was that there had been no warning, no hint that

⁷¹ Arjun Appadurai, “Dead Certainty: Ethnic Violence in the Era of Globalization”, *Development and Change*, 29 (1998), 915-925.

⁷² Geetanjali Shree, *The Empty Space* (Noida-New York: Harper Perennial, 2011).

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 3335 (Kindle).

⁷⁴ Mishra, *Age of Anger*, 16.

they were going to happen.... What was to prevent a riot from happening right now? I thought, even as I lay in this hammock, was it not possible that a mob was getting ready to come to our hotel? I shuddered.⁷⁵

Émile Durkheim⁷⁶ argued that the seriousness of a crime is usually measured by the extent to which it offends or hurts the collective or individual feelings of a group of people, since it represents an attack on the authority or the stability that holds that group together. A violation of the law does not by itself justify the imposition of a specific penalty. The way it is perceived by the community determines its gravity: “harm caused to important interests is not in itself sufficient to determine the ... response; the harm must be perceived in a particular way”.⁷⁷ Following Durkheim, in these novels we can observe how many relationships within and between communities are based more on the different emotional states of the various social categories than on law or justice.

In an India rife with religious conflict, Anjum is spared her life during Hindus’ slaughtering thousands of Muslims in Gujarat only because they irrationally fear that killing a hijra may bring them bad luck:

Bad luck!

Nothing scared those murderers more than the prospect of bad luck. After all, it was to ward off bad luck that the fingers that gripped the slashing swords and flashing daggers were studded with lucky stones embedded in thick gold rings. It was to ward off bad luck that the wrists wielding iron rods that bludgeoned people to death were festooned with red puja threads lovingly tied by adoring mothers.⁷⁸

They humiliate Anjum by making her chant their nationalist victory slogans and leave her “un-killed. Un-hurt.... the longer she lived, the more good luck she brought them”.⁷⁹ As a Muslim, Anjum should have been killed like everyone else, but she is spared because the Hindus fear that killing a hijra will bring misfortune to their cause. She is also not harmed because they believe that the longer she lives, the greater the chances they have of succeeding in their project of social renewal. It is ironic that the very representatives of one of the religions that most discriminates against homosexuals are able to build a negative solidarity with a part of the very people they discriminate against, because they believe that the success of their struggles may well depend upon their survival. And yet, Anjum is forced to disguise herself as a man in order to gain entry into a refugee camp in Gujarat,⁸⁰ her sexuality and Islamic beliefs repeatedly make her the object of different kinds of discrimination which appear all interrelated, sometimes in irrational and contradictory ways.

6. Corruption and Class Conflict

In the India inflamed by “the euphoria of high economic growth figures”, Nathelene Reynolds maintains that “the privileged ... look upon those left behind with suspicion”.⁸¹ Arjie’s father believes that it is sufficient to follow a low profile, to be discreet, and to “tread carefully”⁸² in order for things to work out for them. Therefore, he supports the government in the hope that it will crush the Tamil

⁷⁵ Selvadurai, *Funny Boy*, 180.

⁷⁶ Émile Durkheim, “The Division of Labour in Society” [1893], trans. By. Margaret Thompson, in Kenneth Thompson, *Reading from Emile Durkheim*, revised edition (London & New York: Routledge, 2004).

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁷⁸ Roy, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, 70.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁸⁰ While Mansoor, the son of an old friend of Anjum’s father, shaves his beard, which is highly valued in the Islamic religion, and wears the puja threads traditionally associated with Hinduism in order to survive while looking for her.

⁸¹ Reynolds, “Hindu Nationalism and the Muslim Minority in India”, 279.

⁸² Selvadurai, *Funny Boy*, 196.

Tigers. “Once the government destroys these damn Tigers, everything will go back to normal”.⁸³ Here we see a Tamil siding with his oppressor and even hating other Tamils whom he sees as dangerous because they might incur the wrath of the Sinhalese and the government. His thinking is based on fear of retribution from the powerful, of losing his social position. He fears the destruction of his hotels and property, police harassment, and hostility from his own Sinhalese associates. He rejects his wife’s idea of emigrating to Canada or Australia because Sri Lankans are not offered good job opportunities there and he is appalled at the idea of ending up as a gas station attendant or cab driver.

Similarly, Anjum is changed by the trauma of the violence she endured in Gujarat. As a result of her resentment against Saeeda, who threatens Anjum’s authority in the hijra community to which they belong and in the nuclear family that Zainab represents to her, Anjum develops a sense of dissatisfaction that gradually leads her to leave the hijra community and live (or, as she puts it, ‘die’) in a graveyard. In this place she builds a guesthouse she calls Jannat, or paradise. It will not be populated by ghosts or supernatural beings, but only by heroin addicts, “stray dogs that are better off than humans”⁸⁴ and a few corrupt policemen who are willing to let her live there if she pays them a bribe. As an integral part of the apparatus of oppression that breeds abuse and social injustice, the police have no qualms about preying on the least of the least, who are already struggling to survive. In time, Jannat becomes home to her new family of fallen angels, hijras in exile who, like her, defy the rigid norms of hijra communities.⁸⁵

Characters in both novels are immersed in a hostile environment distinguished by a sense of insecurity that feeds on the fears it stokes. In the Indian subcontinent, anger at being hounded by business or government is widespread, crossing racial and religious lines to reach different social groups. Grievance is prevalent among the lower classes because they fear they cannot cope with a corrupt and servile social system. Indeed, in this regime, the police often serve the powerful to dispossess peasants of their land and property, or falsely accuse innocent people to cover up their own misdeeds, or simply remain silent when mass violence is essential to the interests of the political elite. As a result of the corruption of institutions and their favouritism, violence is the catalyst for fantasies of revenge by the weak, who are often the victims of those who are supposed to protect them.

When Daryl returns to Sri Lanka after more than a decade in Australia, he does so to investigate abuses committed under the Prevention of Terrorism Act. This law was passed by the government in 1978 and empowers the police to arrest and detain anyone who is merely suspected of being a terrorist. As a result, the entire Tamil community lives in fear and becomes easy prey not only for violent nationalists but also for the authorities themselves, who can commit any kind of atrocities and harassment against them simply by raising the spectre of terrorism. Thus, it is not surprising that when Arjie’s mother goes to the police to report Daryl’s disappearance and the fact that his house has been ransacked by strangers, the officers initially ignore her as a Tamil, but then take notice when she mentions her ‘white man’ friend. The police blame Daryl’s servant Somaratne and falsely accuse him of the theft. In reality, the police have probably already been keeping a close eye on Daryl and have broken into his house. After Somaratne also vanishes, Arjie and his mother go to his village to ask about him, but they are pelted with stones and bottles, reflecting the divide between the wealthy urban bourgeoisie and the poverty-stricken rural population. As Tamils, Arjie’s family feels oppressed because of their ethnicity. However, once they become acquainted with the rural world, they find that they themselves are considered “rich folk from Colombo”,⁸⁶ privileged perpetrators of an economic system that ignores peasants as “not even human beings”,⁸⁷ and uses them as cannon fodder at will.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Roy, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, 68.

⁸⁵ During her time here, Anjum tries to heal the double wound resulting from the ethnic and religious violence of which she was a victim in Gujarat, as well as from the rift with Zainab, who is in the care of Saeeda and who occasionally visits her.

⁸⁶ Selvadurai, *Funny Boy*, 153.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

Interestingly, this accusation may not be entirely unfounded: it transpires that at least in one of their hotels, just three hours from Colombo, poor boys prostitute themselves to rich foreigners with the consent of Arjie's father, taking advantage of the fact that the police turns a blind eye because they profit from tourism.

When Daryl's body is found lifeless on the beach of a fishing village, Amma is convinced that he was killed at the behest of the government and that the police are covering it up with the help of false witnesses: "Of course they have witnesses.... They have witnesses for everything these days".⁸⁸ Both she and Arjie feel powerless and "a terrible sadness"⁸⁹ at the thought that Daryl's death remains unexplained and justice is not served. There is no support from the media either. Journalists and storm troopers are busy making "empty questions ... they asked the poor what it was like to be poor",⁹⁰ thereby testifying to their contribution to the corruption of the state. They report only news items that can be spectacularly edited and cannibalised to feed the false pity of those who are a little better off, while ignoring or worse attacking those who try to expose the criminal practices of the corporations, especially in agriculture, that fund their editors' salaries.

7. Conclusions

Even in these extreme circumstances, new and unexpected bonds can be formed: "Once you have fallen off the edge like all of us have", Anjum reminds a Dalit friend⁹¹ in Jannat, "you will hold on to other falling people".⁹² Like Anjum, Arjie feels "caught between [two] worlds, not belonging or wanted in either".⁹³ Precisely because he is marginalised, he is able to establish an unexpected relationship with Radha, the soon-to-be bride who allows him to play with her makeup. As Radha's heterosexual love moves along the ethnic fault line, Arjie thinks about the pain he would feel if he lost her, for she is his only true friend. He also tries to imagine how he would feel if he lost his family because of his sexual orientation. Anjum suffers the same fate twice: first when she comes to terms with her sexuality and later when she realised that she wanted to become a mother to Zainab. Love, as Rossella Ciocca notes, operates "not only against heteronormativity but versus the 'blood and soil' cum religion nationalist rhetoric".⁹⁴ Within these boundaries, both Arjie and Anjum confront the resentments that start building up in their families and spread like wildfire to the outside world. To fully understand queer intersectionality in an age of anger, one must observe the cruel and relentless operations of aggregation and separation fuelled by the fear of total annihilation.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 143.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 158.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 107.

⁹¹ Saddam Hussein, a Dalit who helps Anjum expand the guesthouse business to include funerals. He worked in a mortuary before moving to Jannat, but was fired after an argument with a doctor. His fault was being a Chamar, a derogatory term for Dalits in north and northwest India, denoting a category of untouchables.

⁹² Roy, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, 92.

⁹³ Selvadurai, *Funny Boy*, 45.

⁹⁴ Rossella Ciocca, "Mothering Community: Surviving the Post-nation in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*", *Textus. English Studies in Italy*, 33.3 (September-December 2020), 183-200, 195.