

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ARUNDHATI ROY

Arundhati Roy is an internationally known peace activist and Booker Prize winning author. Born to a Syrian Christian mother and a Bengali Hindu father in in South India, Roy grew up in Kerala and left the city for Delhi to study architecture. Early in her career, Roy wrote for television and films, screenwriting the movie *In Which Annie Gives It Those Ones*, in which she also starred. In 1992, Roy began writing *The God of Small Things*, which was published in 1996 and sold almost immediately in 18 countries. The novel won the Booker prize, and Roy used the prize money and much of the royalties from the book to fund activist causes. Indeed, Roy has been an activist for most of her life, and is particularly involved in anti-globalization and anti-nuclear work. She is extremely critical of the U.S.'s imperial involvement in other nations.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Roy first announced that she was writing another novel in 2007, shortly before massive protests in Kashmir for independence. The demonstrations drew 500,000 to the streets of Srinagar on August 18, 2008, in response to the Indian government's decision to use 99 acres of land in the Kashmir valley for temporary facilities for Hindu pilgrims to the majority-Muslim region. Kashmiri citizens were upset at their land being used for this without their consent, which inspired the protest. Roy publicly supported the protestors and the Kashmiri fight for independence in an interview with *The Times of India* in 2008, and again in 2010 at a conference called "Azadi: The Only Way." For her speech at the convention, Roy was charged with sedition, although she only served one day in jail. The bulk of the plot in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* has to do with characters involved on both sides of the Kashmiri fight for independence. Roy is heavily critical of those on the Indian government's side, and this comes through in her portrayal of the conflict in the novel.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Shalimar the Clown by Salman Rushdie is another contemporary novel about the Kashmir conflict, in which Shalimar, the central character, joins various Jihadist groups to get the training he needs to kill all those he feels have wronged him. Among these people is a U.S. counter-terrorism diplomat to the region who falls in love with Boonyi, Shalimar's fiancé, and begins an affair with her. The story exemplifies the ways in which foreign intervention in Kashmir contributes to the violence in the

region, and more subtly treats the themes of corruption and capitalism that *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* addresses. Similarly, "The Silence is the Loudest Sound," an opinion essay by Arundhati Roy published in *The New York Times*, addresses the Indian government's decision to suspend certain citizens' rights in Kashmir in order to make military occupation of the region easier. In her collection of essays, *My Seditious Heart*—over a thousand pages long—Roy writes about the Gujarat massacre, in which hundreds of Muslim pilgrims were killed by Hindu extremists. In the novel, Anjum survives an attack that is a loosely veiled rendering of this massacre.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*
- **When Written:** 2002
- **Where Written:** Minnesota
- **When Published:** 2009
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary, Postmodern
- **Genre:** Postcolonial Literature, Magical Realism, Political Literature, Realism
- **Setting:** India
- **Climax:** Tilo moves into Jannat House Funeral Services to raise a baby with Anjum.
- **Antagonist:** The Indian government
- **Point of View:** First and Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

A Rare Gem. Although Roy has published many nonfiction books over the years, there was a twenty-year gap between the publication of her first novel, *The God of Small Things*, and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, her second.

Semi-Autobiographical. Like one of the protagonists, Tilo, Arundhati Roy also grew up in Kerala and was raised by a Syrian Christian mother who founded a school.



PLOT SUMMARY

A strange older woman has set up her home in the graveyard behind the government hospital. She doesn't get many visitors at first, but soon the blind old Imam Ziauddin becomes a frequent companion of hers. The two of them read the newspaper together, and the Imam learns that the woman's name is Anjum. She is a Hijra, a transwoman, who has left the Khwabgah where she lived for years with many of Delhi's other Hijras. As a child, Anjum was born intersex, but her mother,

Jahanara, gendered the child a boy and called Aftab.

Although Aftab generally presents as masculine as a child, he is an excellent singer, which causes the neighborhood kids to tease him about being too feminine. When Aftab's father, Mulaqat, discovers that his son is intersex, he forces Aftab to undergo a gender-change surgery and tries to inspire him towards masculinity by telling him stories about his great warrior ancestors. But Aftab admires women far more than men and one day sees a beautiful *Hijra* walking down the street and follows her. He ends up at the Khwabgah, which he goes on to visit daily until the age of 15, when he decides to move there permanently, devastating his parents. There, Aftab transforms into Anjum, and, after having a male-to-female gender transition surgery, Anjum feels like the full version of herself. Anjum becomes a successful *Hijra*, being interviewed constantly by NGOs, human rights groups and journalists. She is beautiful and has an aggressive femininity.

One day, Anjum finds an abandoned baby outside of a mosque and decides to take her home, naming her Zainab. Anjum adores the baby girl but has no idea how to parent, spoiling Zainab and telling her terrifyingly realistic stories about her own life. When Zainab is getting ready to go to school for the first time, she goes through a bout of ill health, inspiring Anjum to take a pilgrimage with Zakir Mian to a holy Muslim site in Gujarat. However, on the pilgrimage, Anjum and Zakir Mian are caught in a massacre. Zakir Mian is killed and Anjum, spared because killing *Hijras* is bad luck, returns a transformed person, trying to dress Zainab as a little boy to protect her from suffering violence. Ustad Kulsoom Bi, the head of the Khwabgah, disagrees with this decision that Anjum has taken, and, upset, Anjum leaves the Khwabgah and moves into the graveyard behind the government hospital, leaving Zainab in Saeeda's care.

In the graveyard, Anjum slowly builds a home around the graves of her ancestors and, when Saddam Hussain, an unemployed Dalit young man on a mission to murder the police officer who caused the death of his father, arrives, she no longer lives there alone. Saddam is the first one to tell Anjum that she ought to charge for guests and charge for funeral services. Soon, Anjum begins calling her home Jannat Guest House and Funeral Services, and tends to all of the outcast and downtrodden members of society.

Meanwhile, Biplab, a bureaucrat in the Indian government discovers that a tenant of his, Tilo, has gone missing. Tilo is a young woman whom Biplab has loved in secret for his whole life, whom he met as a university student acting in a play. At the time, Tilo was dating Musa, a Kashmiri architect, and in spite of this both Biplab and Naga, Biplab's lifelong friend who is also in the play, are wildly in love with her.

In the current day, Biplab is involved in the Kashmir conflict as a bureaucrat whose work serves primarily to cover up the

atrocities committed by the Indian Army in the region. Naga is a journalist, and although he doesn't see himself as corrupt in any way, Biplab views him as a puppet of the government, who reveals only as much as the government want him to reveal. One day on assignment in Kashmir, Biplab receives a phone call from an interrogation center in Srinagar with an encoded message from Tilo. Upon learning that the army has captured her, Biplab sends Naga to collect her from the jail, and soon after, Naga and Tilo marry. However, the marriage doesn't last long, and when Tilo finally leaves Naga, she asks Biplab if she can rent one of his apartments. This is where Biplab finds himself waiting for her, although it seems that Tilo has abandoned the apartment.

Sometime before Biplab arrives at Tilo's former apartment, there is a wild public protest at Jantar Mantar. It starts as an anti-corruption protest by a Gandhian who has gone on hunger strike to speak out against corruption in India. However, soon many, many other causes come to take advantage of the TV coverage at the sight and protest for their own causes. Anjum and Saddam Hussain go together to see what is going on with the protest. One day, a group called the Mothers of the Disappeared finds a baby abandoned on the pavement in front of the protest. Anjum, who believes it is her destiny to be a mother, wants to take the baby home, but the other protesters believe it would be best to hand the baby over to the police. Anjum won't go down without a fight, and Mr. Aggarwal, the bureaucrat advocating for the baby to be handed over to police, is no match for her. But in the middle of the conflict, the baby disappears, and no one knows who's taken her.

The person who has taken the baby is none other than Tilo, who names her Miss Jebeen the Second after Musa's daughter, who was murdered with her mother, Arifa, in a massacre by the Indian government in Kashmir. Tilo has become involved in documenting the Kashmir conflict after she went to visit Musa there one year and was taken captive by the military. After she and Musa have reunited on a houseboat, the military police raid the houseboat, capturing and killing Gulrez, a dear friend of Musa's. That day, the military are led by Major Amrik Singh, and Tilo, once she is free from military custody thanks to Biplab's intervention, vows to get revenge on the major for killing Gulrez. (However, the Major has fled to California, where he kills himself and his wife and children.)

When Tilo resolves to kidnap the baby, she does so for Musa in honor of his dead daughter. But the police are after her, and she needs somewhere safe to go. A friend of hers, Dr. Azad Bhartiya, suggests that she try Jannat Guest House and gives her Saddam Hussain's card. So Tilo plans to have Saddam pick her and the baby up to move to Jannat Guest House permanently. When there, Tilo begins to work as a teacher for the poor, local children, and greatly enjoys her work. Zainab and Saddam fall in love and get married, and many of the other outcasts of the city flock to the space to be in a loving,

welcoming community. Unlike her namesake, Miss Jebeen the Second is raised surrounded by love, peace, and safety.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Anjum / Aftab The protagonist of the novel, Anjum is a fiery Hijra whose independence leads her to build a life for herself completely on the margins of society. Born intersex and gendered a boy by her mother, in childhood Anjum is known as Aftab. As a child, Aftab loves to sing, but stops when other children begin to tease him for having a feminine-sounding voice. One day, home from school after his sex-change operation, Aftab sees a *Hijra*, and is so entranced by her that he follows her to where she lives, which is the *Khwabgah*. Aftab begins to frequent the *Khwabgah*, where he finally feels he has found a home. At 15, he leaves his parent's house to move to the *Khwabgah* for good where he eventually transforms into Anjum. At first, Anjum thinks the *Khwabgah* is a sort of paradise—it's the first place where she's able to express her female gender in the way she's always wanted to. But when she is caught in a Hindu fundamentalist massacre of Muslim pilgrims while on a pilgrimage, she returns to the *Khwabgah* a changed woman, determined to raise her informally adopted daughter, Zainab, as a boy to protect her. When others object, Anjum leaves the *Khwabgah* for good—leaving behind even the five-year-old Zainab, who has become the person Anjum loves most in the world. From the *Khwabgah*, Anjum goes straight to a graveyard behind a government hospital, where she tries to recover from her trauma. Eventually, though, Anjum manages to build a home in the old graveyard—physically and metaphorically. She constructs a house around the graves of her ancestors, and invites many of Delhi's marginalized and forgotten to keep her company. Among her most important companions are Saddam Hussain, who helps her to get started as a funeral services provider, and Imam Ziauddin, a blind old man who visits her in the graveyard since the very first day she arrives. Anjum is able to build a strong community around her new business, which she names Jannat Guest House and Funeral Services.

Tilo – A mysterious, dark-skinned, South Indian woman who seemingly has no past, no caste, and no family, Tilo is a highly independent and secretive character. As a young woman, she is an architecture student and performs in a play with Biplab, Naga, and Musa, and all three young men become enamored of her. She only has eyes for Musa, though, and is an on-and-off lover of his until the day he dies. It is while she is visiting Musa in Kashmir one day that Tilo is taken into custody by the Indian army and is nearly tortured. However, while in custody, she remembers that Biplab is now a successful bureaucrat, and sends a message to him via the soldiers. He sends Naga to go and take her away from the prison, and after this, she marries

Naga—not because she loves him, but because she needs cover now that she is involved with Musa, who is a sought-after member of the Kashmiri resistance. Once her marriage with Naga ends, Tilo moves into an apartment that Biplab owns, and informally adopts a baby she finds abandoned at the Jantar Mantar protests. She names the baby Miss Jebeen the Second after Miss Jebeen, Musa's daughter who died in a massacre in Kashmir. With Miss Jebeen the Second, Tilo goes to Jannat Guest House and Funeral Services to seek refuge, where she becomes a teacher at an informal school.

Biplab Dasgupta – The first-person narrator of a large portion of the novel, Biplab Dasgupta is a Brahmin high-ranking bureaucrat in the Indian government with an alcohol addiction. Biplab seems to have a neutral stance towards many aspects of his life: he knows what he does with the Indian government is corrupt, but he doesn't seem to care. He has a passionless marriage to another bureaucrat and two successful daughters. As a young man, Biplab meets and falls in love with Tilo while starring in a play in which his character name is Garson Hobart. Tilo only calls him by this name for his whole life, even when they are adults. His unrequited love for Tilo is what inspires him to help her get out of military custody in Kashmir, and to rent her one of his spare apartments when she needs it. In the play, Biplab also meets Musa, Tilo's lover who becomes involved in the Kashmir resistance. Biplab is also a lifelong friend of Naga, a journalist whom Biplab has played a hand in corrupting to be a puppet of the Indian government. When Tilo disappears and Biplab's wife leaves him, Biplab becomes obsessed with reading documents that Tilo has left behind regarding the Kashmir conflict, and eventually changes his mind, choosing to be in support of Kashmiri independence.

Naga – A radical left student grown into a successful mainstream journalist, Naga is a lifelong friend of Biplab, and a temporary husband to Tilo. As a young person, Naga has radical politics that turn him into an “unemployable intellectual,” but when he gets older, he begins working with the Indian government in a way that he doesn't realize is corrupt, but in which he essentially tells the stories on the news that they want him to tell. It's possible that Naga is never aware of the extent to which he is simply a puppet for the government. When Tilo is taken into custody by the Indian police in Kashmir, it is Naga whom Biplab sends to pick her up from the police. After this, Naga and Tilo get married—much to the chagrin of Naga's Brahmin parents, who don't like the idea of him marrying a caste-less, dark-skinned woman—although the marriage doesn't last.

Musa – Tilo's lover and a member of the Kashmiri resistance, Musa participates in a play with Tilo, Biplab, and Naga as a young man while he is in architecture school. There, the other boys are intimidated by his quiet but strong presence, and as an adult he maintains the same powerful air. Musa joins the Kashmiri resistance officially after his wife, Arifa, and daughter,

Miss Jebeen, are murdered in a massacre on the balcony outside their home. After this, he disappears into the underground resistance and dies a martyr for Kashmiri independence.

Saddam Hussain – A member of the Dalit caste and former security guard, Saddam Hussain is Anjum’s first permanent guest at Jannat Guest House and Funeral Services. Soon after Saddam moves in, the two become business partners—it is Saddam’s idea to officially offer funeral services at Jannat. Born Hindu, Saddam converts to Islam after his father is murdered by a mob for being suspected of killing a cow. Saddam comes to idolize his chosen namesake, Saddam Hussein of Iraq, for the grace with which he accepts his fate when he is hanged. (Saddam has the video of his idol’s hanging saved on his phone.) Determined to kill the police officer who turned his father over from custody to the mob, Saddam wants to be able to do what he feels he needs to do and accept whatever consequences he needs to for his actions. After being fired from a security guard job, Saddam makes his living exploiting the superstitions of the Hindu community by selling them false good luck charms. Eventually, Saddam falls in love with and marries Zainab, and the two live together in Jannat Guest House and Funeral Services, tending to the animals and the vegetable garden.

Major Amrik Singh – A major of the Indian Army known for torturing and murdering many members of the resistance, Major Amrik Singh is an extraordinarily violent man. Even the Indian army, which commits daily atrocities in Kashmir, is shocked by the number of innocent people the major has brutally killed, without the request or even authorization of the army. The major also abuses his wife, Loveleen, with whom he eventually seeks asylum in the United States. The major, however, is not really an asylum seeker; rather, the Indian army has decided that he is too much of a liability to have on the force and sends him away. Tilo and Musa become obsessed with killing the major after he murders their friend, Gulrez. Eventually, there’s no need to kill him—once granted asylum in California, he murders his wife and three children before committing suicide.

Ashfaq Mir – A Kashmiri Deputy Commandant in the Indian Army, Ashfaq Mir has an alarmingly false air of good will about his work. When Tilo is taken into custody in Kashmir, it is Ashfaq who is tasked with turning her over to Naga, who has come to pick her up. Although Ashfaq consistently tortures and kills Kashmiri members of the resistance, he refers to all Kashmiris as his brothers and insists on the lie that the Indian Army never kills “Kashmiri boys.” In a subtle way to ask Naga for forgiveness for having taken Tilo into custody, Ashfaq Mir offers Naga an interview with Aijaz, a young Kashmiri militant in captivity.

Zainab – Anjum’s informally adopted daughter, Zainab was abandoned on the steps of a mosque as a baby and taken in by the Khwabgah. Anjum adores raising a child, although at first,

she is not very skilled at it. As a young child, Zainab is subjected to hearing terrifying stories of Anjum’s misadventures and experiences of oppression, which make the toddler Zainab scared and unhappy. Zainab’s stubbornness earns her the nickname “Bandicoot,” and, predictably, she throws a fit when a traumatized Anjum tries to dress her as a boy to protect her from violence. After the conflict this choice causes in the *Khwabgah*, Anjum leaves, and Zainab is raised mostly by Saeeda, another Hijra living in the *Khwabgah* with whom Zainab is close. As an adult, Zainab reestablishes a relationship with Anjum, and even marries Anjum’s close friend and business partner, Saddam Hussain. Zainab’s strongest personal trait is her ferocious love for animals: as a child, she tries to save animals destined for slaughter on the streets from their butchers, and her pet goat (a gift from Anjum) survives a record six Eid’s without being slaughtered for the religious feast. As an adult, her love for animals continues, and she brings many a foster animal to live at Jannat Guest House and Funeral Services, where she eventually moves in.

Ustad Kulsoom Bi – The Head Hijra of the Khwabgah, Ustad Kulsoom Bi is a powerful member of the transgender community in Delhi. She is in charge of managing the business (many of the *Hijras* at the *Khwabgah* are sex workers) and the day-to-day maintenance of the house. She is proud to be a *Hijra*, and often reminds her mentees that *Hijras* have been an important part of Indian society for a very long historical period, citing an exhibition at the Red Fort as an example, for it contains in an audio recording the sound of a court eunuch laughing. When Anjum wants to force Zainab to present as a little boy because she believes it is safer during the current political climate, Ustad Kulsoom Bi is extremely opposed to the idea. She reminds Anjum that the core principle of the *Khwabgah*, and of any *Hijra*, is consent. There are rumors spread that *Hijras* kidnap and castrate male children, she reminds Anjum, and they all have a responsibility to dispel that superstition. Her firmness on the matter is what first inspires Anjum to move out of the *Khwabgah* and into the graveyard.

Imam Ziauddin – The first friend Anjum makes when she moves to the graveyard, the old Imam Ziauddin is blind and often bonds with Anjum when she reads newspaper articles to him. While he is accepting of Anjum as a friend, he once makes the mistake of asking her where *Hijras* are buried when they die—implying that *Hijras* aren’t welcome in traditional Muslim burial ceremonies. Over the course of the novel, however, Imam Ziauddin will come to perform funeral rites for some of the many *Hijras* who are buried at Anjum’s Jannat Guest House and Funeral Services, who have nowhere else to go.

Miss Jebeen – Musa’s daughter, who dies at the age of three in a massacre in Srinagar, Kashmir. Her mother, Arifa, has gone outside to watch the funeral procession of Ustad Hameed Khan, when an explosion goes off, inspiring soldiers to fire at the crowd. The bullet that kills mother and daughter enters

through Miss Jebeen's temple and goes through her mother's heart. Miss Jebeen is the namesake for Miss Jebeen the Second, whom Tilo names after Musa's deceased daughter out of love for him.

Miss Jebeen the Second / Miss Udaya Jebeen – Also known as Miss Udaya Jebeen, Miss Jebeen the Second is the baby Revathy gives up at the Jantar Mantar protest, whom Tilo kidnaps and then raises at Jannat Guest House with Anjum. Surrounded by love in spite of coming into the world in the bleakest circumstances, Miss Jebeen the Second symbolizes hope and resilience for many of those around her.

Gulrez – A friend of Musa's who has special needs. Sweet and attentive, Gulrez comes to meet Tilo at the bus station when she first arrives in Kashmir, and cooks meals for her and Musa during their stays on the houseboat. Gulrez is traumatized from his experiences with the Indian army. As a young man, he mistakes the Indian army for the Pakistani army, imagining Pakistan has come to free Kashmir. He runs towards soldiers to kiss their hands only to be shot in the leg and severely beaten. Gulrez has relationships with animals that are very dear to him, including one with a rooster called Sultan who is murdered by the army as well. When the military raid the houseboat where Gulrez is staying with Tilo, Musa has just left, and the military, led by Major Amrik Singh, mistake him for Musa and severely torture and murder him. This murder is what inspires Tilo and Musa to go after Major Singh for revenge.

Revathy – Miss Jebeen the Second's birth mother who sends a letter to Jannat Guest House via Dr. Azad Bhartiya explaining who she is. A low-caste woman from a rural area in India, as a young girl Revathy always excels in school but lacks the resources to pay for her education. In government college, she is radicalized by Maoist Communists, and dedicates her entire life to the Communist cause. One day, she is captured by police, and raped and tortured. She escapes, but realizes that she is pregnant, which devastates her. She is ill throughout her entire pregnancy, and when Miss Jebeen the Second—whom she calls Udaya, which means "sunrise"—is born, Revathy considers killing her. However, she instead decides to give up the baby at the protest, where she sees many good people. After that, exhausted from so many years of struggle, Revathy returns home to die by her own hand. After reading her letter, Anjum gives Revathy a symbolic funeral service.

D. D. Gupta – One of Anjum's most loyal and oldest clients, who works in construction in Iraq. D. D. Gupta is one of the first people to visit Anjum after she moves to the graveyard, and sends hot meals for her once a week by way of his servant. D. D. Gupta works selling construction materials to the American army in Baghdad, a job which initially he does not find at all morally corrupt but later grows to abhor. When he returns to India from Iraq, sick of all the violence, he takes to spending long afternoons with Anjum in Jannat Guest House and Funeral Services.

Maryam – Tilo's mother, a South Indian Syrian Christian born into an upper-caste family. Maryam becomes pregnant with Tilo as a teenager and, because her parents forbid her from keeping the baby, gives Tilo up for adoption—only to readopt her and claim Tilo as her foster daughter. Maryam is the founder of a highly successful, progressive high school, famous for its innovative teaching methods. Still, in spite of her intellectual prowess, when she is elderly and falls sick, she becomes delirious, dictating nonsensical notes for Tilo, who visits her every day, to write down. In her delirium, Maryam becomes particularly concerned with the social caste of everyone around her—her nurses, doctors, and even her own daughter.

Aijaz – A young Kashmiri militant whom Naga interviews when he goes to rescue Tilo from the interrogation center. Ashfaq Mir, a commandant in the Indian Army, has told Naga that Aijaz has been "neutralized" and is in custody voluntarily to protect himself from his revolutionary friends and family. But Aijaz corrects the story when he is left alone with Naga: being in police custody couldn't be farther from his wishes. Indeed, far from neutralized, he longs more than anything to kill the "murderers of [his] people."

Dr. Azad Bhartiya – A radical protestor on his 12th year of a hunger strike, Dr. Azad Bhartiya is passionate about a number of leftist causes, from the end of corruption to the end of US imperialism to the end of "price-rise." He has written an extensive document detailing his positions on a variety of political issues, and listing his various academic qualifications (although a Ph.D., he admits, isn't technically one of them; his doctorate is pending). When Miss Jebeen the Second is kidnapped off the pavement at the protest, the police question Dr. Bhartiya about the baby's disappearance, knowing he sees everything at Jantar Mantar. But the doctor says nothing, although he knows that Tilo has taken the baby. He is the one who puts Tilo in contact with Saddam Hussain, so she can escape to Jannat Guest House and Funeral Services, where he himself is a frequent guest.

Jahanara – Anjum's mother. When her baby is born, Jahanara believes it is a boy and names it Aftab. Although she discovers the second day after Aftab's birth that he has female as well as male genitalia, Jahanara keeps this secret to herself, telling no one that the son she has wanted for so long (after bearing three daughters) is, in fact, intersex. Instead, she goes to the shrine of Hazrat Sarmad Shaheed to bless her baby, not knowing why she was called to that particular site but going all the same. When Aftab begins to be teased for having a feminine singing voice, Jahanara finally confides in her husband, Mulaqat Ali, who decides that Aftab should undergo sex change surgery. Once Aftab left her home and gone to live in the Khwabgah, Jahanara continues to see her child, now Anjum, at first in weekly visits to the *Khwabgah*, and then, later, occasionally at the shrine of Hazrat Sarmad Shaheed. When Jahanara passes

away, she is buried at Anjum's new home, Jannat Guest House and Funeral Services.

Mulaqat Ali – Anjum's father. A direct descendent of a Moghul emperor, Mulaqat Ali is fond of retelling myths of the Moghul dynasty and reciting Urdu poetry. When his wife, Jahanara, reveals to him that their child—then Aftab—is intersex, he suggests that Aftab undergo a gender alteration surgery. After Anjum has moved to the Khwabgah, Mulaqat Ali never speaks with her again.

Ustad Hameed Khan – The singing teacher who teaches Aftab to sing beautifully, but in such a tone that he is teased by his peers for sounding like a girl. Later, Ustad Hameed Khan gives singing lessons to Zainab, Anjum's first daughter, although the girl has no talent for singing. When Jannat Guest House and Funeral Services becomes a blossoming, full community, Ustad Hameed Khan is a frequent guest, and gives singing lessons there as well.

Zakir Mian – An older Muslim man and a friend of Mulaqat Ali, with whom Anjum travels to Gujarat to go to an important Muslim shrine to seek spiritual assistance for Zainab's ill health. On their journey, Zakir Mian and Anjum are caught up in a Hindu fundamentalist massacre of Muslim pilgrims. Zakir Mian is murdered, but Anjum, because she is a Hijra, and killing *Hijras* supposedly brings bad luck, is spared.

Mansoor – Zakir Mian's son. Once the region of Gujarat has calmed down after the massacre, he goes to see if he can find out what happened to Anjum and his father. He never finds his father but does hear that he has been murdered in the massacre. Eventually, though, he does find Anjum in a refugee camp, dressed in men's clothes and in the men's section. He is the one to bring her back to the Khwabgah.

Dr. Bhagat – A doctor whom Ustad Kulsoom Bi and many other Hijras at the Khwabgah trust to manage their mental health treatment and gender-transition hormone treatments. While most of them trust that Dr. Bhagat is a skilled medical professional, Anjum is adamant in her refusal to take what seem to be the medicines he prescribes her for mental health purposes. Later in life, she admits that she has always thought his services are a scam.

ACP Pinky – The only female character in the army, ACP Pinky is known for her violent interrogation techniques, which seem at odds with her beauty. Rumored to be Major Amrik Singh's lover, it is Pinky who questions Tilo when she is in military custody. Not knowing how to torture her without leaving marks, ACP Pinky decides to shave Tilo's head, which causes Tilo great embarrassment.

Mr. Aggarwal – A bureaucrat and aspiring politician, Mr. Aggarwal is present at the protests at Jantar Mantar trying to build a name for himself. His desire to establish a solid political reputation is what leads him to get in a fight with Anjum when an abandoned baby (Miss Jebeen the Second) is found on the

premises. Mr. Aggarwal thinks the baby should be handed over to the police, while Anjum strongly disagrees. The two get into a nonviolent, but still intense, street fight.

The Princess – Naga's girlfriend, for a time. She comes from a minor royalty family and, unlike Naga's ex-wife, Tilo, has light skin and stereotypically feminine habits, like sewing and interior decorating. When the Princess suggests to Naga that she needs to cleanse his home of Tilo's chi, Naga realizes he still has feelings for Tilo, and breaks up with the Princess.

Showkat – Musa's father, who, unlike his son, does not seem to oppose the Indian army's occupation of Kashmir. Indeed, Showkat works selling building supplies to the military, and is a friend of Major Amrik Singh. Showkat is highly concerned when the major implies to him that Musa may be a member of the resistance, and studies his son closely to see if it is true. Once Musa has left home and joined the resistance for good, Showkat never hears from his son again.

Saeeda – A "more modern" Hijra who lives with Anjum at the Khwabgah, Saeeda is young Zainab's second favorite. Anjum—jealous of her both for Zainab's affection and because Saeeda, with her modern terminology, has stolen Anjum's spotlight in the media—believes that Saeeda has cursed Zainab when she suffers a bout of ill health. Once Anjum leaves the *Khwabgah*, Saeeda raises Zainab on her own.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Dr. Ghulam Nabi – The doctor who calls himself a "sexologist," whom Jahanara and Mulaqat trust to perform a surgery on their son, Aftab, that gets rid of his female genitalia.

Dr. Mukhtar – The doctor that performs Anjum's second gender transition surgery, this time male-to-female rather than female-to-male.

Arifa – Musa's wife and Miss Jebeen's mother. She dies by the same bullet as her child.

David Quartermaine – The British director of the play that Naga, Tilo, and Biplab star in as teenagers when they first meet.

Ishrat – A young Hijra who is visiting Anjum at Jannat Guest House when Anjum decides to go to the Jantar Mantar protest. When Anjum gets in a fight with Mr. Aggarwal over the abandoned baby on the pavement, Ishrat intervenes, fighting Mr. Aggarwal through dance and song.

Anwar Bhai – The owner of a local brothel, Anwar Bhai brings Anjum her first funeral client at Jannat Guest House and Funeral Services, as he can find no other place to bury Rubina, one of the sex workers he was responsible for who has died.

Rubina – A deceased sex worker, and the first body Anjum buries at Jannat Guest House and Funeral Services.

Saqib – Anjum's younger brother, who, for legal purposes, is registered as Zainab's father.

Loveleen Singh – Major Amrik Singh’s wife, Loveleen Singh is born into an impoverished Sikh family more than happy to marry her off to a successful army man. Loveleen experiences extensive domestic abuse at the hands of her husband. Once granted asylum in California, Major Amrik Singh murders Loveleen and their three children.

Ralph Bauer – A California LCSW (Licensed Clinical Social Worker), who writes documentation supporting Major Amrik Singh and Loveleen Singh in their petition for asylum in the United States.

Gujarat ka Lalla – Literally meaning “beloved of Gujarat,” Gujarat ka Lalla refers to a Hindu fundamentalist politician who rises to fame and is eventually elected Prime Minister in India. Gujarat ka Lalla admires figures such as Hitler and openly advocates for violence against Muslims.

Khadija – A friend of Musa’s who takes messages to Tilo from his part, Khadija herself becomes a good friend of Tilo’s as well.

Nimmo A Hijra, and friend of Anjum, who believes that Hijras are totally incapable of happiness.

TERMS

Azadi – A word in the Kashmiri dialect that loosely translates to “freedom,” although the pathways to freedom, and what freedom means when it is achieved, mean very different things to different members of the Kashmir community.

Brahmin – The highest caste in India’s traditional caste system. Historically, Brahmins have had occupations such as religious leaders and teachers. In the novel, Roy makes it clear that Brahmins still have the most social power out of any caste—**Biplab Dasgupta**, a high-ranking official in the government, is a Brahmin, as are many of his colleagues.

Chamar – The particular category of the Dalit caste to which **Saddam Hussain** belongs. Traditional Chamar professions include leather tanning and weaving.

Duniya – **Anjum** uses *Duniya*, literally translating to “the world,” to refer to the mainstream—straight, cis-, middle-class, or Hindi members of society. The way she uses the word implies that she and the marginalized people that she lives with are not part of the real world, and live in a world adjacent to reality.

Dupatta – A long piece of fabric usually worn as a head covering or a scarf, traditionally with a salwar kameez.

Eid – a Muslim holiday. Eid is a feast marking the end of Ramadan, the month of religious fasting. Traditionally, those celebrating Eid sacrifice a goat for the feast. **Anjum** does this when she hosts her first Eid at Jannat Guest House and Funeral Services.

Hijra – A term that translates to “eunuch,” or an intersex, transgender, or third gender person, *Hijra* in the novel is used to

refer to **Anjum** and the other trans women that live with her in the Khwabgah. Some believe that Hijras are divine spirits trapped in human form, which is why the superstitious avoid getting on a Hijra’s bad side for fear of being cursed.

Khwabgah – Literally translating to “sleeping quarters,” in the novel the Khwabgah is the home to a host of transgender women who are like family to one another. **Anjum**, an intersex person who was gendered male as a child but later transitions to a female identity, adores the Khwabgah when he first discovers it as an adolescent. She later moves in, and members of the Khwabgah encourage and support her to go for a male-to-female transition surgery. Some members of the Khwabgah, including Anjum, are sex workers. **Ustad Kulsoom Bi** is the head of the Khwabgah, in charge of determining who gets to stay and what the rules of the house are.

LCSW – Licensed Clinical Social Worker. This term refers to a type of social worker that has the training necessary to perform mental health services and evaluations. **Ralph Bauer** is the LCSW who diagnoses **Major Amrik Singh** and his wife, **Loveleen Singh**, with PTSD so they can qualify for asylum in the United States.

Salwar Kameez – Salwar refers to light, loose pants that taper to fit around the ankle. Kameez is a long, light tunic generally worn with salwar.

Untouchable / Dalit – Refers to people considered to be outside of India’s traditional four-caste system. Dalits, known in English as untouchables, form a fifth caste that exists at the bottom of the social pyramid. Today, the Indian government recognizes the term Dalit, which is historically offensive, as unconstitutional, and prefers the term Scheduled Caste. Although discrimination against members of the Dalit caste is now unconstitutional, it is still very common. In the novel, **Saddam Hussain** is of the Dalit class, and experiences discrimination because of this.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



CORRUPTION, POLITICAL VIOLENCE, AND CAPITALISM

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness paints a portrait of contemporary, postcolonial Indian politics. Through the differing points of view of the story’s characters, Arundhati Roy illustrates the many ways in which various groups of the Indian population have been let down and oppressed by their

political leaders after the 1947 partition between India and Pakistan. In particular, through her illustration of the ongoing Kashmir conflict between these two countries, she highlights corruption in all political groups involved: the Indian army, Indian leftists who oppose the occupation of Kashmir, and the Kashmiri locals and militants who apparently resist the military occupation. Each group claims to have a moral or religious imperative behind what they advocate for, and yet they take actions that are often selfishly motivated by monetary gain and therefore out of alignment with their alleged beliefs. In questioning the integrity of each group involved, Roy ultimately sheds light on the ways in which corrupt capitalism undermines the supposedly moral intentions of the groups involved in the Kashmir conflict.

The Indian Army receives the brunt of Roy's criticism for their seemingly limitless corruption and unwarranted violence against Kashmiri citizens—all for the sake of profiting from the war. In one moment, Naga, a leftist Indian journalist, is questioning Aijaz, a young member of a Kashmiri militant resistance group. Aijaz shares with Naga that the militant group buys their ammunition from the army, explaining, "They don't want the militancy to end. They are very happy with the situation as it is. Everybody on all sides is making money on the bodies of young Kashmiris." Here, Aijaz highlights the ultimate act of corruption on the part of the army: they are fueling the very conflict that they claim to be fighting against. While Indian military officials in Kashmir claim to believe in Indian nationalism, and supposedly want to integrate Kashmir into their country, in reality they want the conflict to continue simply so that they can continue to profit from the war.

Additionally, Indian officials are prone to killing innocent Kashmiris and pretending they are dangerous terrorists, because they are rewarded for this. Biplab Dasgupta, an Indian bureaucrat who narrates part of the novel and works with the Kashmir conflict, wryly comments, "everyone [the military] picked up was always "dreaded," seldom less than "A-category," [...] because each of those adjectives had a responding incentive," such as a cash reward. Biplab implies that these adjectives don't always apply to the captured Kashmiris, which means that, again, Indian soldiers are willing to undermine their own supposed mission—to win the war against Kashmir—for capital gain. Not only are they simply not doing their job; they are willfully harming Kashmiris, who are technically Indian citizens, which furthers their characterization as corrupt.

Through Roy's characterization of Naga, a corrupt journalist who allegedly reports on human rights abuses, she also criticizes the Indian left. Naga is a journalist who claims to have radical leftist beliefs, and yet who, according to Biplab, "has a handler—though he might not see it quite that way—in the Intelligence Bureau." Biplab later reveals that when Naga begins to collaborate with the government, he receives promotions and accolades at work because he is the first

journalist to hear about special, government-related news. As a character, Naga embodies the corruption of the media: in spite of his so-called progressive values, he is ultimately willing to tell only the stories the government wants him to tell, because doing so grants him a position of power within his profession. Like the soldiers, Naga is willing to stray from his values due to the influence of capitalism.

Finally, although Roy is not as extensively critical of corrupt Kashmiris as she is of characters from mainland India, she does make sure not to exempt them from criticism of corruption. In Biplab's narration of the Kashmir conflict, he shares, "For all their religiosity, Kashmiris are great businessmen. And all businessmen eventually, one way or another, have a stake in the status quo—or what we call the 'Peace Process,' which, by the way, is an entirely different kind of business opportunity from peace itself." In this moment, again, readers are exposed to the idea that those who seem to be fighting to end a conflict often profit from its continuation. The double irony in this sentence is that Biplab refers to the "peace process" as different from peace itself. This suggests that in addition to benefitting from the conflict, Kashmiri businessmen are complicit in contributing to the myth that the selling of arms and continued fighting is an effort towards peace when they are, in reality, destined to bring unending conflict, and therefore unending profit to the businessmen who take advantage of the political situation.

By casting all groups involved as corrupt, Roy avoids aligning herself with any particular political ideology. However, she does effectively paint a portrait of the heavy influence of corrupt capitalism in modern geopolitics, and the ways in which moral or religious ideologies serve primarily to mask capitalist interests rather than as the real motivations behind war.



RESILIENCE AND HOPE

While *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* paints, on the whole, a relatively bleak portrait of politics and violence in modern India, resilience and hope

among the characters is an important thread throughout the work. In the novel, Roy addresses social inequalities, political corruption, and a great deal of violence through the points of view of various characters. However, she also highlights the history of hope and resistance in India, and the characters' resilience in the face of contemporary political oppression. In doing so, Roy suggests that hope is the most important sources of empowerment for those facing oppression, and suggests that although the characters may not see the immediate effects of their resistance or resilience, these powerful forces are ultimately capable of thwarting oppression.

At the beginning of the story, Anjum—a transgender woman and one of the book's main characters—is taken as a baby by her mother to the shrine of Hazrat Sarmad Shaheed, a martyr who is a source of spiritual nourishment for many characters in

the story. Anjum's mother asks the spirit of Shaheed to help her love her baby, whom she has discovered is intersex. Shaheed was a Jewish merchant who moved to Delhi to be with a Muslim man he was in love with. For his beloved, Shaheed later converted to (and then renounced) Islam. Shaheed was executed because he renounced Islam, and even when given the opportunity to save his life by proclaiming his loyalty to the faith, he refused. Although he lost his life for this, his spirit lives on in the shrine, encouraging visitors towards "stubborn, ecstatic love even when faced with the prospect of annihilation." It is, presumably, this spirit that helps Anjum's mother to love Anjum in spite of her intersex gender. Over the course of the novel, Anjum visits Shaheed's shrine with various other characters, and, presumably, draws strength and support from his spirit. The fact that Shaheed's spirit is able to continue loving and nourishing people even though he himself was executed exemplifies the idea of resilience. It seems that his spirit defied the wills of those who executed him, seeking to destroy both him and his ideas. Through casting a noble martyr as a source of spiritual support for the characters in the novel, Roy demonstrates the importance of hope in spite of obstacles.

Roy also subtly celebrates the resilience of the non-corrupt, civilian members of the Kashmiri resistance. In her descriptions of the Kashmiri conflict, Roy draws much attention to the dead bodies of both innocent citizens and members of the militia, highlighting how Kashmiris go out to give their dead proper burials in spite of the threat of a military attack. This act of courage alone demonstrates the resilience of the Kashmiri people. In one moment, the sister of a murdered, innocent young man describes how "when her brother's body was [...] brought home, his fists, clenched in rigor mortis, were full of earth and yellow mustard flowers grew from between his fingers." In this moment, the juxtaposition of rigor mortis and the mustard flowers is a metaphor for home. Although rigor mortis implies the rigidity and apparent permanence of death, the mustard flowers represent new life being born of and nourished by death. In other words, death is not a permanent end, since it serves to create new life. This image suggests the inevitability of life continuing in the face of violence. Roy infuses the description of the dead body with the possibility of hope for a better future.

Finally, the story of Miss Udaya Jebeen—the baby adopted by Anjum and Tilo (another central character)—epitomizes the power and importance of hope. Miss Udaya Jebeen is an abandoned baby whom Tilo found and adopted. Tilo originally named her "Miss Jebeen the Second" after Miss Jebeen, her lover Musa's daughter who was murdered by the Indian army in Kashmir. Once Tilo and Anjum have adopted the baby, they receive a letter from her mother, a member of the Communist resistance who became pregnant because she was raped by policemen in custody. She named her baby Udaya, which means "sunrise." In this way, Miss Udaya Jebeen's represents hope in

the face of violence. Sunrise is often a metaphor for the future and new beginnings. Additionally, in being named after Miss Jebeen, Miss Udaya Jebeen is a metaphorical reincarnation of her namesake. She represents the second chance at building a better future.

The story of Miss Udaya Jebeen is particularly important, because it is on this note that Roy ends the narrative. In the last passage of the novel, Guih Kyom the dung beetle is "wide awake and on duty, lying on his back [...] to save the world in case the heavens fell. But even he knew that things would turn out all right in the end. They would, because they had to. Because Miss Jebeen, Miss Udaya Jebeen, was come." Here, Roy makes it clear that the baby symbolizes hope, and survival in spite of the threats of enormous violence. The fact that this passage is told from the perspective of a dung beetle furthers this claim, as dung beetles sustain their own lives by feeding on the waste of other animals. They represent the turning of one cycle into another. By ending the story on a hopeful note, Roy draws readers' attention to the importance of the characters' resilience throughout the novel, implying that their strength and continued resistance will eventually allow them to achieve a more peaceful future.



GENDER IDENTITY, SOCIAL DIVISION, AND COEXISTENCE

The first half of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is told through the point of view of Anjum, a transgender woman and former sex worker who was born intersex—with both female and male genitalia. (Her mother gendered Anjum a boy and named him Aftab, and he/him/his pronouns are used to refer to Aftab at the beginning of his life before he starts identifying as a trans woman.) Through Anjum's eyes, readers are exposed to the various inequalities and forms of violence that plague the city in which she lives. The Urdu word for transwoman is *Hijra*, an identity that is very important to Anjum and the other trans women she lives with. Through exploring the ways in which Anjum navigates gender identity and by portraying her trans identity in a positive and nuanced light, Roy challenges not only the idea of a gender binary, but also other artificial forms of social division—particularly nationality and religion.

Although Anjum lives in a highly sexist society that privileges the masculine over the feminine, her identity as a *Hijra* grants her a special social status that sometimes protects her. Traveling to a popular Muslim shrine, Anjum and a host of other pilgrims are attacked by Hindu terrorists seeking justice for Hindus recently killed by Muslim militants. Every Muslim in the area is massacred, except for Anjum, who is spared because, as one of the extremists observes, "killing Hijras brings bad luck." In this instance, Anjum's marginalized identity literally saves her life. Although she suffers discrimination in her society for being a *Hijra*, in instances like this, the folklore surrounding

Hijras—that they are “holy souls trapped in bodies”—protects her. While Roy in no way seems to argue that being a *Hijra* is a privilege, she does highlight some ways in which Anjum’s inability to participate in the gender binary has special, positive effects.

One of the characters, Nimmo, another *Hijra* with whom Anjum lives, relates the experience of being a *Hijra* to the conflict between India and Pakistan, linking the gender binary to the violent partition of the two countries. Before Aftab has moved in to the Khwabgah, the brothel where he will live with other trans sex workers, he idealizes the place. But Nimmo, who already lives there, tells the young Aftab that “No one’s happy here [...] The war is *inside* us. Indo-Pak is *inside* us. It will never settle down.” Here, Nimmo equates the conflict between the two new countries with the perceived conflict between masculine and feminine genders that occurs in *Hijras*. This analogy is interesting, because throughout the novel, the India-Pakistan conflict is portrayed as senseless violence, a war between two peoples that had forgotten they were once neighbors, who “had been to each other’s weddings.” By paralleling this needless conflict with a perceived conflict between genders in *Hijras*, then, Roy implies that perhaps just as Indians and Pakistanis are not really separate from one another, the masculine and feminine genders are not necessarily opposites that are in conflict with each other. Aftab disagrees with Nimmo’s pessimistic outlook, thinking to himself that he was “happier than he had ever been.” This suggests that he himself might also have an understanding that the gender binary is artificial, and a recognition that multiple genders can coexist within the same being.

In both of the above instances, Anjum’s lived experience defies the logic of the gender binary. Anjum seems to embrace that both genders live within her—indeed, she changes her gender presentation several times over the course of the novel, demonstrating that, although she does have a preference for feminine presentation, she is able to acknowledge and work with the masculine that she has inside of her. Through presenting us with a character who defies the gender binary, Roy invites readers to see past not only the strict, artificial categories that separate masculine and feminine—but also, by extension, those that separate Hindu from Muslim, Indian from Pakistani. In a way, Anjum embodies the concept of coexistence, by allowing two genders considered to be fundamentally opposite to coexist within her. By characterizing this as a special, and even sacred, identity, Roy demonstrates the power that comes from embracing difference rather than seeking to destroy it.

Utmost Happiness is a rigid social hierarchy, maintained principally by the caste system but also upheld by religious differences. While the conservative characters in the novel seek to uphold the hierarchy that privileges them, the oppressed and marginalized characters continuously fight for greater equality in their society. By demonstrating the difference between the characters that believe in hierarchy versus those that combat it, Roy ultimately demonstrates that social hierarchy is isolating and perpetuates violence, whereas social inclusivity allows characters to live more happily and peacefully.

Biplab Dasgupta, the narrator of part of the novel and a Brahmin government official who works with the Kashmir conflict, serves to exemplify the elitism and conservatism of India’s Hindu upper classes. Dasgupta introduces himself as the “upper-caste, upper-class oppressor from every angle,” or, in other words “a tragedy-less man.” Indeed, he does seem to have no problem with the oppressive aspects of his job—he manipulates and uses Naga, a “leftist” but corrupt journalist, to cover up human rights abuses that occur in Kashmir, for instance. It is clear that Biplab’s class privilege isolates him from his fellow countrymen, to the point where he is comfortable working in a job that kills them. However, his assertion that he is a “tragedy-less man,” is, in some ways, ironic. In addition to being an oppressive but successful functionary of the government, Biplab is an alcoholic with a failing marriage. This suggests that he views tragedy only within the contexts of lacking political power, but seems unable to see the tragedy of loneliness that is his own life. What’s more, he never had the courage to tell Tilo, the headstrong, South Indian woman with whom he is infatuated, that he likes her. In fact, the first thing he mentions about Tilo is that “she didn’t look like any of the pale, well-groomed girls [he] knew at college. Her complexion was what the French might call *café au lait* (with very little *lait*).” His immediate noticing of Tilo’s skin color—an important class marker in India—demonstrates how deeply he has been conditioned to think, first and foremost, of social status. Biplab ends up unhappily marrying another Brahmin woman named Chitra. This suggests that his reluctance to tell Tilo about his feelings doesn’t just stem from a childish fear of talking to women; likely, his hesitance stems from an inability to step across the class lines that separate them. Thus, Biplab’s class privilege doesn’t only isolate him in a broad sense from members of other classes: they cause him to isolate himself in his personal life, as well.

By contrast, Anjum and the community she creates completely disregard social hierarchy and espouse radical inclusivity, which is what allows them to have such a loving, nurturing community. A little bit after Anjum moves into a local graveyard, she begins to offer funeral services to the people of the city. For her, “the one clear criterion was that Jannat Funeral Services would only bury those whom the graveyards and imams of the Duniya had



SOCIAL HIERARCHY VS. SOCIAL INCLUSIVITY

One of the most salient aspects of contemporary Indian society that comes across in *The Ministry of*

rejected.” By positioning herself as marginal to the *Duniya*, or the “real world,” Anjum opens herself up to accepting all marginalized populations, who have no other place to bury their dead with dignity. Anjum elevates and celebrates the human life that is discarded and disrespected by the society in which she lives. It is through this that she is able to build community and business; the funeral home is almost always bustling with friends and customers. In addition to accepting customers in spite of their low social status, Anjum also accepts customers regardless of their religion, and makes a point of performing the correct funeral services for each one. Comically, when she decides to perform a funeral ceremony for Miss Udaya Jebeen’s birth mother, a communist revolutionary who has died, she “[wants] to know what the correct rituals were for the funeral of a communist.” This endearing but misguided assumption—that communism is a religion with specific rites for funeral services—demonstrates the extent to which Anjum is not only accepting of people from all different backgrounds, but also respectful of those differences.

The name Anjum chooses for her funeral home is also significant—it is *Jannat*, which means “paradise.” The idea that paradise would be a shack in the middle of a graveyard surrounded by homeless people and people struggling with addition is, at first, startling. But it is through demonstrating the extent to which Anjum is able to build community surrounding that place that Roy may be able to convince readers that *Jannat Funeral Services* may, indeed, be a kind of paradise. It is a place where the downtrodden are welcomed, where the marginalized finally find a home. The overall vision Roy creates of India is thoroughly dystopic in the level of violence the powerful inflict on the powerless—the military occupation of Kashmir, and the murders of Muslim and lower-caste people at the hands of Hindu mobs all clearly implicate social division as the root of violence. By contrast, *Jannat Funeral Services* provides the only space of utopia. Through juxtaposing *Jannat*, which exists far on the margins of society, with the violence and isolation that even the most privileged members of mainstream society experience, Roy clearly illuminates the values of social inclusivity rather than hierarchy.



RELIGION AND POWER

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness addresses a wide range of issues facing contemporary Indian society.

Among these various struggles, one of the most salient is religion: much of the violence that the characters observe and experience in the novel stems from conflicts between Hindus and Muslims. Roy demonstrates the ways in which religious extremism in both faiths leads to greater violence and intolerance in India. In doing so, she highlights the danger in allowing religious belief to seep into politics.

The first half of the novel contains many references to the rise of Hindu nationalism and violence that Muslims in mainland

India suffered at the hands of Hindu extremists after the partition of Pakistan and India. When Anjum goes on a pilgrimage to a Muslim place of worship, she disappears because of Hindu extremist attacks. Allegedly, these attacks are in response to the burning of a train full of Hindus by “Pakistani terrorists.” In delivering this news, “a weaselly ‘unofficial spokesperson’ announces unofficially that every action would be met with an equal and opposite reaction.” Here, Roy’s emphasis on the “unofficial” nature of this statement, which quite explicitly incentivizes the killing of Muslims as revenge for their supposed attack on the Hindus. To maintain the façade that the government is not officially advocating for the murder of Muslim citizens, the ruling party has an *unofficial* spokesperson say this. But the fact that anyone associated with the government would make such a statement in public is alarming, and demonstrates the extent to which Hindu nationalism has dangerously entered the mainstream politics of the country. Years later, Gujarat ka Lalla, a politician who was deeply involved with the Hindu nationalist movement, “swept the polls and was the new Prime Minister. People idolized him, and temples in which he was the presiding deity began to appear in small towns.” That Lalla’s political supporters would choose to celebrate his victory by placing him in the same position as a god demonstrates that, for them, politics and religion are almost inextricably intertwined. The blending of religion and government clearly allows for the continued violence against religious minorities in the country.

While on the whole Roy is far more critical of Hindu extremist government than she is of the Muslim resistance in Kashmir, she does clearly illustrate the ways in which extremist Islam serves only to divide communities from each other and further the violence in the region. One day in Kashmir, Usman Abdullah, “a prominent ideologue in the struggle for *Azadi*” is murdered by “the emerging hardline faction of militants” whom he openly opposed. Of an older generation, Abdullah was a university professor who believed in the “worshipping of home-grown saints and seers at local shrines” among other things offensive to the more radical Muslim groups that were claiming control of Kashmir. Here, what’s most clear is that the extremist beliefs of the new generation of militants led them to kill a member of their community, who supported their cause. It is evident that in espousing radical beliefs that lead to more and more factions among the Kashmiri community, the militants weaken their cause simply by reducing the number of people who willingly support and participate in the movement. While Kashmiris are united in their desire for freedom, even this the new generation of militants managed to make extremist: their interpretation of *Azadi*, the Kashmiri word for freedom, was “What does freedom mean? There is no God but Allah.” This interpretation of freedom clearly limits, in fact, the liberty of any citizens who would live under the rule of these militants, and sets the precedent for an intolerant Kashmir. Even if the militants were to win independence, with an ideology like this,

the citizens would be likely to continue to experience at least some degree of religious conflict and violence.

Through portraying the extremism of religiously affiliated political leadership among Hindus and Muslims alike, Roy highlights the danger of lack of separation between church and state poses to citizen safety and liberty.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE COLOR SAFFRON

In the novel, the color saffron represents the violence of conservative, Hindu extremist political parties. This is a loosely veiled reference to the political party of India's current prime minister, Narendra Modi, who has pushed a neo-fascist Hindu nationalist agenda, erasing religious minorities from public school history books and turning the other cheek to lynch mobs that terrorize Muslim and lower-caste communities. Modi supporters often wear the color saffron, which is a special color in the Hindu religion, in protests. In the novel, when Anjum is involved in a massacre of Muslim pilgrims to Gujarat, Roy refers to the attackers as "saffron parakeets with steel talons and bloodied beaks, all squawking together." While saffron is a sacred color for the Hindu extremist groups, in the novel it appears only to symbolize religious violence, or the trauma that Anjum experiences as a survivor of religious violence.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* published in 2017.

Chapter 2 Quotes

☞☞ Sarmad's insubordinate spirit, intense, palpable and truer than any accumulation of historical facts could be, appeared to those who sought his blessings. It celebrated (but never preached) the value of spirituality over sacrament, simplicity over opulence and stubborn, ecstatic love even when faced with the prospect of annihilation.

Related Characters: Anjum / Aftab, Jahanara

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Roy describes the spirit of Hazrat Sarmad Shaheed, whose shrine Jahanara goes to visit when she discovers that her son Aftab is intersex. In his lifetime, Sarmad was a courageous mystic. He fell in love with another man and moved with him to Delhi from his homeland of Persia. For his lover, Sarmad converted to Islam, although later in life he renounced this religion—a choice for which he paid with his life when the Muslim king asked him to repeat, "There is no God but God," and Sarmad simply said, "There is no God."

When Jahanara goes to Sarmad's shrine, she doesn't know why she chooses this holy site in particular. But she does know that the place is always filled with society's misfits, whom she generally disregards until Aftab's birth, when they suddenly seem to her "the most important people in the world." Sarmad's shrine and the blessing he bestows on the baby Aftab represent the value of difference and of resistance. The qualities listed in the quote above are of utmost importance in Anjum's life, and in the personalities of all characters in the book that Roy paints as resilient enough to endure and fight against the oppression of the society they live in.

☞☞ "But for us the price-rise and school-admissions and beating-husbands and cheating-wives are all *inside* us. The riot is *inside* us. The war is *inside* us. Indo-Pak is *inside* us. It will never settle down. It can't."

Related Characters: Nimmo (speaker), Anjum / Aftab

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Nimmo is contradicting a naïve Aftab's idealization of the *Khwabgah*. Aftab thinks everybody in the *Khwabgah* is happy, as they are *Hijras*, or transwoman, who in the outside world cannot express their gender in the way they would like to, but in the *Khwabgah* are free to be who they really are. But from Nimmo's perspective, being a *Hijra* is like having two warring genders or identities inside. In a way, she depoliticizes the *Hijra* identity. Whereas people in the outside world are upset about "price-rise" and "Indo-Pak" and other matters that have to do the political climate, *Hijras* are upset about their very natures. Nimmo doesn't

address the fact that *Hijras* might suffer because the politics of the society in which they live deny their full humanity and discriminate against them.

“Once you have fallen off the edge like all of us have [...] you will never stop falling. And as you fall you will hold on to other falling people. The sooner you understand that the better. This place where we live, where we have made our home, is the place of falling people [...] We aren't even real. We don't really exist.”

Related Characters: Anjum / Aftab (speaker), Saddam Hussain

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 88

Explanation and Analysis

In this moment, Anjum is explaining to Saddam Hussain her philosophy on being a marginalized person. She describes the life she's set up for herself in the graveyard, where she has built a home and begun to build a community with the other people who live in the area. The metaphors Anjum uses for being on the margins of society—falling off the edge, even ceasing to exist—paint this lifestyle as a challenging, if not outright unwise, choice. However, the most important part of this quote is the part about holding on to other falling people. In the society Anjum lives in, social hierarchy is so rigid that many people are discriminated against and cannot participate in society or community. By embracing her marginality, Anjum is able to create community with the many others who have been rejected or discriminated against by mainstream society.

Chapter 3 Quotes

[Delhi's] 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. It was the summer Grandma became a whore.

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 160

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Roy is describing the changes that politicians are imposing on Delhi. In an effort to impress the international market, Delhi's leaders have begun to forcibly remove the poor from the city and raze impoverished neighborhoods. The metaphor of comparing Delhi to an old woman suggests that the politicians are far more concerned with appearances than with addressing the city's underlying issues, which are analogous to the health problems the metaphorical Grandma clearly faces. Roy's choice to compare the city to a woman also highlights her analysis of gender performance—women commodify their appearances for profit, just as politicians want to create a clean aesthetic for Delhi so they can pitch it to First World tourists and investors.

Chapter 4 Quotes

“But even if I was President of America, that world class Brahmin, still I would be here on hunger strike for the poor. I don't want dollars. Capitalism is liked poisoned honey. People swarm to it like bees. I don't go to it.”

Related Characters: Dr. Azad Bhartiya (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 133

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is an excerpt from Dr. Azad Bhartiya's lengthy *News & Views*, a radical, self-published justification of the many reasons Dr. Bhartiya has spent the last 12 years on a hunger strike protest. In this moment, he highlights capitalism and the caste system as two of the central problems with India's government and society. By comparing the United States to a Brahmin, he associates the highest caste in the caste system with political and economic power and privilege. This comparison is important, as it challenges the notion that high-caste status is simply something that runs through family bloodlines—the President of the United States cannot be a Brahmin, of course, because he was not born in India. But by calling him a Brahmin, Dr. Bhartiya seems to be making the claim that the maintenance of the caste system serves only to secure the political and economic power of the high castes, and has less to do with tradition and culture. Additionally, Dr. Bhartiya suggests that those with such privilege do not care about the poor, because, presumably, they've swarmed to the “poisoned honey” of capitalism, which allows them to live in comfort even while millions of others live in abject poverty.

Chapter 7 Quotes

“The city is still stunned by the simultaneous explosions that tore through a bus stop, a café and the basement parking lot of a small shopping plaza two days ago, leaving five dead and very many more severely injured. It will take our television news anchors a little longer than ordinary folks to recover from the shock. As for myself, blasts evoke a range of emotions in me, but sadly, shock is no longer one of them.”

Related Characters: Biplab Dasgupta (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 147

Explanation and Analysis

This quote characterizes the new narrator that appears in this chapter, Biplab Dasgupta, and describes India’s current political climate. First off, by sharing that he doesn’t experience shock when dozens of people are killed in bombings, Biplab reveals himself to be jaded and emotionally cold. What’s more, the fact that these types of attacks have become so commonplace suggest that violence is now woven into the cultural fabric of India’s society. The television news anchors clearly sensationalize the violence, which, in Biplab’s eyes, seems to be a reaction that is slightly out of touch with reality—“ordinary people,” who are accustomed to the attacks, are able to go on with their normal lives. Clearly, the media is trying to maintain the illusion of normalcy, that such attacks are rare and shocking exceptions to the norm when in reality they are becoming more and more the norm itself.

“I feel a rush of anger at those grumbling intellectuals and professional dissenters who constantly carp about this great country. Frankly, they can only do it because they are allowed to. And they are allowed to because, for all our imperfections, we are a genuine democracy. I would not be crass enough to say this too often in public, but the truth is that it gives me great pride to be a servant of the Government of India.”

Related Characters: Biplab Dasgupta (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 151

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Biplab reveals his distaste for India’s critics. By referring to them as “professional dissenters,” Biplab subtly undermines their authority, by suggesting that part of their motivation for dissenting is to receive money. Additionally, Biplab’s suggestion that it is possible for people not to be “allowed” to criticize India is a little off-color. Democracy doesn’t have to do with the government giving people permission to criticize it; rather, it has to do with government respecting the inherent rights of the people to express their opinions. In Biplab’s phrasing, the power rests heavily within the hands of the government, rather than with the people. Finally, Biplab’s assertion that India is a “genuine democracy” will, over the course of the novel, be severely challenged by Roy’s portrayal of the Indian government’s actions—several of which Biplab takes the lead on.

“Like many noisy extremists, [Naga] has moved through a whole spectrum of extreme political opinion. What has remained consistent is only the decibel level. Now Naga has a handler—though he many not see it quite that way—in the Intelligence Bureau. With a senior position at his paper, he is a valuable asset to us.”

Related Characters: Biplab Dasgupta (speaker), Naga

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 166

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Biplab is referring to Naga, his childhood friend who is now a successful journalist. Biplab not only criticizes Naga’s character, but he also reveals his own corruption. First of all, he suggests that Naga forms political opinions not because he has strong values and cares deeply about certain issues, but merely because he craves attention. It is this quality that the government exploits in order to be able to “handle” Naga—Biplab has revealed that government officials give Naga special tips that allow him to get ahead in his field, in exchange for Naga’s silence on their various human rights violations—though, notably, it seems that the naïve Naga isn’t aware that there’s an exchange taking place. Here, Biplab inadvertently challenges his own assertion that India is a democracy, as freedom of the press is a key element to a truly democratic country.

“The inbuilt idiocy, this idea of jihad, has seeped into Kashmir from Pakistan and Afghanistan. Now, twenty-five years down the line, I think, to our advantage, we have eight or nine versions of the ‘True’ Islam battling it out in Kashmir [...] Some of the most radical among them [...] are actually on our payroll. One of them was recently blown up outside his mosque by a bicycle bomb. He won’t be hard to replace. The only thing that keeps Kashmir from self-destructing like Pakistan and Afghanistan is good old petit bourgeois capitalism. For all their religiosity, Kashmiris are great businessmen. And all businessmen eventually, one way or another, have a stake in the status quo—or what we call the ‘Peace Process,’ which, by the way, is an entirely different kind of business opportunity from peace itself.”

Related Characters: Biplab Dasgupta (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 173-174

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Biplab is talking about the Kashmir conflict and the Indian government’s occupation of the region. He reveals the corruption behind both the Indian government and Kashmiri citizens. The Indian Army clearly exploits the Kashmiri people’s religiosity by trying to divide them among various factions of Islam pitting these factions against one another. That the government would actually fund the religious extremists it claims to be fighting against reveals their corruption—rather than sincerely trying to restore safety and stability in the region, they feed the fires of the conflict and compound the region’s lack of security. Biplab implies that this is economically beneficial for India when he references the government’s collaboration with Kashmiri businessmen. His admission that the “Peace Process” is very different from peace itself suggests that the government isn’t really seeking to bring peace to the region, rather to maintain the instability for profit.

“This was Kashmir; the Separatists spoke in slogans and our men spoke in press releases; their cordon-and-search operations were always ‘massive,’ everybody they picked up was always ‘dreaded,’ seldom less than ‘A-category,’ and the recoveries they made from those they captured were always ‘war-like.’ It wasn’t surprising, because each of those adjectives had a corresponding incentive—a cash reward, an honorable mention in their service dossier, a medal for bravery or a promotion.”

Related Characters: Biplab Dasgupta (speaker), Major Amrik Singh

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 180

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Biplab has received a phone call from Major Amrik Singh in which the major claims to have captured an “A-category” terrorist. Biplab, again, seems to have adopted a jaded attitude about the war. It is clear that the army has become corrupted due to the incentives that are offered them for capturing, killing, and torturing. Biplab suggests that officials lie about the nature of the people they have captured in order to get ahead. This demonstrates the corrupting influence capitalism has on the functions of the government. It is clear that a policy like this creates leeway for the military to capture, murder, and torture innocent people, only to claim that they were dangerous terrorists. This demonstrates the lack of respect that the army has for the Kashmiri people, and the insincerity of their claims to be serving and protecting them.

Chapter 8 Quotes

“They would swarm out of their homes in their hundreds of thousands and march to the graveyard, unaware that even the outpouring of their grief and fury had become part of a strategic, military, management plan.”

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 234

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Roy describes the Kashmiri people’s dedication to honoring those who have died in the conflict with the military as a form of resistance. The Kashmiri people demonstrate great resilience in continuing to show up for and ritualize the deaths of their community, even as the deaths become overwhelming in frequency and number. For them, this is an important occasion on which to show their resistance to the military—at the funerals, they often publicly declare their desire for independence. However, because the military understands that the people, without the opportunity to express themselves freely, would likely overthrow them, the military allows these “outpourings of grief” as a subversive way of maintaining control over the people.

“I would like to write one of those sophisticated stories in which even though nothing much happens there’s lots to write about. That can’t be done in Kashmir. It’s not sophisticated, what happens here. There’s too much blood for good literature.”

Related Characters: Tilo (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 288

Explanation and Analysis

This is a passage lifted from Tilo’s book that documents the Kashmir conflict, called *The Reader’s Digest Book of English Grammar and Comprehension for Very Young Children*. Tilo reveals that she feels her story is unsophisticated because of the sheer amount of blood and violence in its pages. By including this in Tilo’s book, Roy invites readers to consider the entire novel through this lens. The novel is, after all, similar to Tilo’s book in that it exposes readers to great amounts of blood and violence, simply because Roy is trying to get at the truth of the brutality that occurs under the Indian government’s oppression. This quote raises important questions of the value and utility of literature: is *Ministry of Utmost Happiness* unsophisticated because it includes stories of violence? Or do definitions of what sophistication is, as Roy suggests, need to be reimagined to include stories of violence and brutality?

Chapter 9 Quotes

Rumor had it that the unidentified martyr who was buried that night—the founder-corpse—was not a corpse at all, but an empty duffel bag. Years later, the (alleged) mastermind of this (alleged) plan was questioned by [...] a member of the new generation of freedom fighters, who had heard this story and was troubled by it: “But [...] does this not mean that our Movement [...] is based on a lie?” The grizzled mastermind’s (alleged) reply was, “This is the trouble with you youngsters, you have absolutely no idea how wars are fought.”

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 317

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Roy reveals more information about the martyrs’ graveyard in Kashmir. The funerals that take place their draw thousands from their homes, and all Kashmiris

that die in conflict with the military are buried there—whether they had the intention to martyr themselves or not. The emotions that the martyrs’ graveyard provokes in people inspires them all to remain resilient, and inspires many to join the armed resistance force. So the rumor that the martyrs’ graveyard may have started with a duffel bag stems from the idea that martyrs’ graveyard originated as a way to mobilize the people and inspire them to continue fighting more than simply a way to honor the dead. The founder of the graveyard demonstrates his disregard for the truth when he tells the younger member of the resistance that he has no idea how wars are fought, suggesting that lies and manipulation are necessary in war. This demonstrates, in turn, that the resistance movement is corrupt just like the government.

On this occasion Miss Jebeen was by far the biggest draw. The cameras closed in on her, whirring and clicking like a worried bear. From that harvest of photographs, one emerged a local classic. For years it was reproduced in papers and magazines and on the covers of human rights reports that no one ever read.

Related Characters: Miss Jebeen

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 333

Explanation and Analysis

In this moment, Roy again highlights the media’s superficiality. Miss Jebeen and her mother have just died, shot as they observed a funeral procession from their balcony. The journalists who take Miss Jebeen’s photograph do so, supposedly, to draw attention to the Kashmir conflict, presumably with the goal of eventually helping the situation to improve. But Roy’s offhand, bleak reference to the fact that no one reads the type of human rights reports on which this photograph is likely to be printed suggests that interest in the Kashmir conflict is performative and superficial. Just as the army is motivated by material incentives, the journalists, perhaps, are more concerned with producing a beautiful and shocking image than they are with doing anything to alleviate the conflict in Kashmir.

“The corrosion in Kashmir ran so deep that Amrik Singh was genuinely unaware of the irony of picking up a man whose wife and child had just been shot and bringing him forcibly, under armed guard, to an interrogation center at four in the morning, only in order to offer his commiseration.”

Related Characters: Arifa, Miss Jebeen, Musa, Major Amrik Singh

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 341

Explanation and Analysis

In this moment, Miss Jebeen and Arifa have just died, and Major Amrik Singh has called Musa in for questioning. Apparently, at his wife and child's funeral, Musa's quietness was suspicious, which led the major to call him into the interrogation center for questioning. Clearly, the major is so accustomed to the deaths of Kashmiri people that he has lost touch with how greatly this must emotionally impact citizens. He also seems to feel no guilt or responsibility for the military's actions. After all, Arifa and Miss Jebeen died by military bullet. In this way, Major Amrik Singh demonstrates his emotional detachment from the Kashmiri people and conflict. He also represents the lack of accountability and responsibility on the part of the military for the deaths of citizens.

“If that fool didn't know how to live here with the military, why did he have to come into this world in the first place?”

Related Characters: Gulrez (speaker), Tilo, Musa

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 363

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Gulrez is sharing with Musa and Tilo the story of how his pet rooster, Sultan, died. The rooster stood by Gulrez's side as he was questioned by the military, and an army official sent his dog to capture and kill Sultan so the army could eat it for dinner. Gulrez laments that Sultan didn't know how to “live under the military,” and that this caused Sultan's death. The fact that Gulrez understands knowledge of how to live with the military as a fundamental skill to survival suggests that he sees military occupation as a given aspect of life in Kashmir. Additionally, it's not clear what knowing how to live with the military would mean inn

practice—all Sultan did was come and stand by Gulrez's side, after all, and this caused his death. With this quote, Gulrez presents one of the greatest difficulties Kashmiris face: living under military rule when any action whatsoever could cause them to be questioned, tortured, or killed.

“She described how, when her brother's body was found in a field and brought home, his fists, clenched in rigor mortis, were full of earth and yellow mustard flowers grew from between his fingers.

Related Characters: Tilo

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 379

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Tilo is traveling through Kashmir when she meets a woman whose brother's body has been returned home and describes the flowers growing out of his hand to Tilo. The image of mustard flowers emerging from a dead body symbolizes hope and resilience in the face of death, as well as life's power to overcome obstacles. While the dead man's body is “clenched in rigor mortis,” which reminds readers of the apparent finality and stagnancy of death, the blooming yellow flowers—bright, vibrant, alive—seem to suggest that the man's life has given way to another form of life. In other words, the cycle of life continues in spite of the violence the Kashmiri people face.

Chapter 10 Quotes

“So all in all, with a People's Pool, a People's Zoo and a People's School, things were going well in the old graveyard. The same, however, could not be said of the Duniya.

Related Characters: Tilo, Zainab, Anjum / Aftab

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 405

Explanation and Analysis

In this moment, Roy has presented readers with an overview of the many conquests that Anjum has made through Jannat Guest House and Funeral Services. She has managed to accumulate enough wealth to build a pool (albeit without water); Zainab has rescued so many street

animals that she creates a zoo; and Tilo has begun giving classes for the local poor children. Anjum's commitment to building community with other oppressed and marginalized people has taken her far, and allowed her to build not just a home but her own world at Jannat Guest House. The fact that she is able to thrive even while the rest of the world is falling apart demonstrates just how distanced she is from the *Duniya*, or the real world. On the margins of the world, Anjum has created a safe world for herself by separating from the violence and oppression of mainstream society.

Chapter 12 Quotes

●● How

to

tell

a

shattered

story?

By

slowly

becoming

everybody.

No.

By slowly becoming everything.

Related Characters: Tilo (speaker), Musa

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 442

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is an excerpt from a poem that Tilo reads to Musa on the last night they spend together at Jannat Guest House and Funeral Services. Readers can use the poem to analyze Roy's style in constructing *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. In the novel, Roy has attempted to tell the

“shattered story” of violence and oppression in India, gender discrimination, and the Kashmir conflict all in one. She has chosen to do so, indeed, by “slowly becoming everything”—by sharing with readers such an expansive variety of characters and experiences and places that readers are exposed to the vast array of the fragments of the “shattered story.”

●● By the time they got back, the lights were all out and everybody was asleep. Everybody, that is, except Guh Kyom the dung beetle. He was wide awake and on duty, lying on his back with his legs in the air to save the world in case the heavens fell. But even he knew that things would turn out all right in the end. They would, because they had to. Because Miss Udaya Jebeen was come.

Related Characters: Anjum / Aftab, Miss Jebeen the Second / Miss Udaya Jebeen

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 444

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Anjum has taken Miss Jebeen the Second for a nighttime walk. Miss Jebeen the Second was born into extremely bleak circumstances—her mother, Revathy, conceived her when she was raped by police officers, and even considered killing Miss Jebeen the Second when she was born. But Revathy decided to give Miss Jebeen the Second up for informal adoption, and the baby ended up in Anjum's loving care. Having survived such difficult circumstances only to end up with a good life, Miss Jebeen the Second represents the importance of resilience and hope. The fact that the dung beetle feels so strongly that everything will be okay simply because Miss Jebeen the Second further emphasizes that the child is a symbol of hope for the future.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

In Delhi, even the vultures are dying. Poisoned by a chemical compound found in cow aspirin commonly given to the cows of the city, the vultures have become extinct. But still, a mysterious woman who lives in a graveyard is able to confer with their ghosts, who, according to her, “aren’t altogether unhappy at having [...] exited from the story.”

The woman, who introduces herself as Anjum, has lived in the graveyard behind the government hospital for several months, and it was difficult at first. Surrounded by junkies and the homeless, she endured her fair share of ridicule from the graveyard’s other inhabitants. They called her a “clown without a circus,” or a “queen without a palace.” But once she befriends an elderly, blind imam named Ziauddin, the others in the graveyard leave her alone.

In addition to listening to music and convening with the vultures, Anjum enjoys reading. She makes a habit of reading the newspaper aloud to Ziauddin. One day, she is reading to him when he asks her, “Is it true that even the Hindus among you are buried, not cremated?” Wounded by his question, Anjum tries to avoid answering, but he persists, asking, “Tell me, you people, when you die, where to they bury you? Who bathes the bodies? Who says the prayers?”

Anjum doesn’t answer the question, but by way of response asks the blind old man what goes through his mind when people speak of color. Ziauddin has no reply, and Anjum continues, asking the imam to answer his own question about death: “You’re the Imam Sahib, not me. Where do old birds go to die? [...] Do you not think the All-Seeing, Almighty One who put us on this Earth has made proper arrangements to take us away?”

The story opens with an image of destruction so extreme that even vultures—who usually feed on the dead—are dying. This sets readers up for a novel that explores the many ways in which the city of Delhi operates in ways that endanger all of its inhabitants, human and animal alike.



The fact that the graveyard is behind the government hospital is a thinly veiled critique of the quality of medical care in Delhi. The implication is that the government hospital provides such a low standard of care that being interned there is essentially a death sentence; the next step is the graveyard. Additionally, the names that the inhabitants of the graveyard call Anjum emphasize her position on the margins of society. By calling her a “clown without a circus” or a “queen without a palace,” the people in the graveyard are emphasizing the fact that she is a person without a context, without a place in society.



Here, readers realize that Anjum clearly belongs to some sort of social group that is particularly excluded from traditional practices and norms. Hindus aren’t traditionally cremated, so the Imam’s assertion that “even the Hindus among” people like Anjum aren’t cremated lets readers know that she belongs to a group of people that is deemed unworthy of traditional rites of passage.



In this moment, Anjum hands Ziauddin’s question back to him. She implies that it is religious leaders’ responsibility to provide answers and solutions to the members of their faith who live on the fringes of society, who do not conform to social or religious norms. She also implies that in God’s eyes, all people are worthy of a respectful burial.



To this, Ziauddin has no response, and he ends his visit earlier than usual. Still, Anjum knows he'll be back—she's lonely, and she knows he is too. They need each other. In not answering his question, Anjum has respected the secrets of her former home, the Khwabgah—although she didn't leave on the best of terms, she knows it's not her place to spill the house's secrets.

Anjum's observation that she knows Ziauddin will be back even though she has insulted him draws attention to the ways in which social isolation and marginalization force people to coexist who wouldn't normally associate with one another.



CHAPTER 2

Anjum is born the fourth of five children. The first three are girls. At birth, the midwife presents Anjum to her mother as a boy, and her mother, Jahanara Begum, is absolutely thrilled. She has been wanting a boy for years, and has already picked out a name—Aftab. But when the sun rises the day after Aftab's birth, Jahanara picks up her newborn child only to discover, underneath his tiny penis, “a small, unformed, but undoubtedly girl-part.” When she sees that her child is intersex, Jahanara is devastated. She even contemplates killing herself and the baby.

Jahanara's eagerness to have a baby boy demonstrates the extent to which the male gender is privileged over the female in Jahanara's society. Her impulse to kill herself and the baby when she realizes Aftab is intersex reveals the glaring intolerance that abounds in her community: she finds the idea of having a child who doesn't fit into strict gender categories to be so unbearable that she thinks it might be better for the child not to live at all.



Jahanara's confusion and disappointment leads her to feel terrified of her own child. She thinks to herself that in Urdu, the only language she knows, everything has a gender—except her own child. Of course, she remembers, even in Urdu there are words for people like Aftab: Hijra and Kinnar. Still, she thinks to herself “two words do not make a language. Was it possible to live outside languages?” She isn't able to answer her question, and worries for her child.

Throughout the novel, Roy examines language's ability to describe reality. In this passage, Jahanara unknowingly engages with an age-old philosophical question: is language created in response to reality, or is reality created in response to language? She thinks that because there are no words for people like Aftab, they can't exist. This line of thinking, though, shows how people sometimes allow language's limitations to limit their tolerance for difference.



Ultimately, Jahanara resolves to keep her baby's gender a secret. But she does decide to take little Aftab to a sacred place to bless him, the shrine of Hazrat Sarmad Shaheed. She doesn't usually go to this particular shrine, but feels called to it on this particular occasion, “perhaps [...] drawn to the strange people she had seen camped there [...] 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 seem[] to be the most important people in the world.”

In this moment, Jahanara's choice of a shrine is significant. By writing that the people who frequent the shrine are the type Jahanara wouldn't normally even look at, Roy implies that the shrine-goers are socially marginalized. Jahanara's sudden belief that they are the “most important people in the world” demonstrates that Aftab's birth has already begun to change Jahanara's relationship to social hierarchy. She is more accepting of those on the margins of society because she recognizes her child to be one of them.



Shaheed was an Armenian Jewish merchant who travelled to Delhi to be with his beloved, a young Hindu boy. Later in life, Shaheed converted to Islam, which he also ultimately renounced. At the end of his life, he wandered the streets, naked, living as an ascetic and accepting alms. He was ultimately arrested, and the king tried to force him to admit there was no God but the Muslim God. Because this was contrary to his belief, Shaheed refused, and was beheaded. At his shrine, his “insubordinate spirit [...] celebrate[s] (but never preach[es]) the virtue of spirituality over sacrament, simplicity over opulence and stubborn, ecstatic love even when faced with the prospect of annihilation.” Jahanara asks the spirit of Shaheed to bless her Aftab, and he does.

Aftab passes as a normal boy until he is five years old. Jahanara waits for his “girl part to heal,” and meanwhile Aftab starts going to school, where he particularly enjoys singing lessons. His voice is high and sweet, and Jahanara sends him to Ustad Hameed Khan, a renowned young musician. Aftab excels at singing, and his high voice allows him to sing even female parts. For this, adults celebrate him, but other children tease him. Eventually, the teasing becomes so bad that Aftab wants to give up music classes. But Ustad Hameed won't hear of it, and gives Aftab lessons on his own.

The time comes for Aftab to have his circumcision, and although Jahanara attempts to put off this rite of passage, there comes a time when she can no longer avoid it. Desperate, she finally confides in her husband, Mulaqat Ali, and tells him their son is intersex. Once a successful tradesman, the business Mulaqat worked at selling beverages weakened with the violence of partition, and the arrival of Coca-Cola in India. He works as an herbalist to supplement his income, and can trace his family lineage back to the Mongol Emperor Changez Khan. Fond of Urdu poetry, Mulaqat often has a verse of a poem suitable for any situation—but when his wife tells him about their son, no comforting poem comes to mind.

Mulaqat comes to the conclusion that he and his wife need to take Aftab to Dr. Ghulam Nabi, a “sexologist.” Dr. Nabi declares that Aftab is not technically a Hijra, what he defines as a male trapped in a female body. Indeed, male traits seem to be more dominant, but the doctor warns Aftab's parents that “Hijra tendencies”—behavioral as well as physical—are not likely to go away. He prescribes Aftab some pills and recommends a surgeon who could seal Aftab's “girl-part.”

Shaheed's story is an archetype of resilience and hope in the face of difficulty. Over the course of her life, Anjum also develops and makes use of her own “insubordinate spirit” and love “in the face of annihilation.” Undoubtedly, Anjum will live a life on the margins of society, and because of this position, she will experience many difficulties. However, Shaheed's blessing provides her with resilience and strength of character to navigate these challenges.



This is the first moment in the novel where readers see the way that Aftab sees himself—not how his parents or society see him. While it is clear that Jahanara wants more than anything for Aftab to be traditionally masculine, Aftab's relationship style of singing reveals that he may have a more feminine nature rather than a masculine one.



The story about Mulaqat Ali's failed business is the first moment in the novel where Roy explicitly discusses the ways in which capitalism has affected the characters. Coca-Cola represents the arrival of globalist capitalism in India. The fact that it weakens Mulaqat's business selling a beverage traditional to the region demonstrates the power American companies have under capitalism to weaken not only the economies of Third World countries, but also the survival of their unique cultures.



Readers are introduced to the word Hijra, which is a very important term over the course of the novel. But Dr. Nabi's description of the term is confusing: by saying Aftab is not a male trapped in a female body, he implies that he can tell by way of someone's physical appearance what their gender identity is. This perspective on gender is continuously challenged as the novel unfolds.



Mulaqat decides Aftab will get the gender-change surgery, and while he saves up money, he resolves to tell his son stories about his Mongol ancestors. The men were fierce warriors, but Aftab is captured by the story of a warrior queen, and finds himself wanting to be her. While his siblings all go to school, Aftab stays at home, observing the neighborhood. One day he sees a tall, thin woman “wearing bright lipstick, gold high heels and a shiny, green satin salwar kameez” and, again, wants to be her.

Aftab follows the fascinating woman all the way down the street until she enters a house with a blue doorway. He is intrigued by her in part because he knows that if she were *really* a woman, she wouldn't have been allowed to dress that way—she would have had to wear a burqa or at the very least a head covering. Aftab longs to be her, to have her graceful walk and stylish clothing—for “it [is] not Aftab's girl-part that [is] just an appendage.”

Every day, Aftab stands outside the house, which he learns is called the Khwabgah, or “house of dreams.” At first, the residents of the house all shoo him away, not wanting to upset his father. But Aftab sticks around, runs errands for them, and occasionally massages their feet. Eventually, they let him in. Aftab is fascinated by the house and its residents, mostly Hijras. Kulsoom Bi is the head of the house, and Aftab befriends Nimmo, a *Hijra* who “would have been beautiful but for her fast-growing facial hair” who is “obsessed with Western women's fashion.”

One day, Nimmo asks Aftab why God made Hijras. She answers her own question, saying that it was an experiment, that God wanted to create something that was totally incapable of happiness. Aftab protests, saying he loves the Khwabgah and that everyone seems happy there. Nimmo disagrees, going on to say that everything that makes “normal people” unhappy is outside of them—cost of living, abusive husbands, disappointing children, Hindu-Muslim conflicts. But, she says, for *Hijras*, “The war is *inside* us. Indo-Pak is *inside* us.”

In this passage, Mulaqat essentially tries to pitch masculinity to Aftab, attempting to convince his son of the merits of the male gender over the female one. Aftab's desire to be the warrior queen reveals, with clarity, his true gender identity.



Aftab's observation that the woman, who is a Hijra, wouldn't be able to dress that way if she were a “real” woman is interesting, and complicates readers' understanding of Hijras as being marginalized, oppressed, and discriminated against. In some ways, Hijras are more powerful than cis-gendered women in the world of the novel and have more liberty to express themselves freely. In this way, the margins of society are not just a place of oppression, but also a place of liberation.



The meaning “house of dreams” for the Khwabgah has various significations in the story. Firstly, for Aftab it is the place of his dreams, a space that he never has known could exist but where he sees he will be able to express himself in ways that he has never imagined possible in the rest of the world. Secondly, there is a lot of language surrounding the Khwabgah and other spaces Anjum inhabits in the story that describes them as being separate from the real world. The Khwabgah, for being so different from the rest of society, exists almost as a sort of parallel universe, as a dream world.



Here, Nimmo's view on what it means to be a Hijra starkly contrasts with Aftab's. While Aftab sees beauty in the world of the Khwabgah and the expressions of those who live there, Nimmo sees a group of people who are incapable of happiness because their identities are so marginalized that they do not even make sense to mainstream society. By comparing being a Hijra to having an internal India-Pakistan conflict, Nimmo demonstrates that she believes the difficulty Hijras face doesn't come from a society that doesn't respect their identity, but rather from a genuine internal conflict between the masculine and feminine identities.



When Nimmo says this, Aftab wants to say she's wrong, because he loves the Khwabgah. But a couple years later, when his body begins to change, he understands the suffering she speaks of. He becomes tall and muscular, and, worst of all, develops a deep, masculine voice. He resolves never to sing again, except in jest. This, for him, is the last straw—without music, there is nothing tying him to the Duniya, or the real world. He steals some of his parents' money, packs up his things, and moves into the *Khwabgah*.

At first, Jahanara begs Aftab to leave the Khwabgah, but he refuses. She resolves to meet with him every so often at the shrine of Hazrat Sarmad Shaheed. Mulaqat, ashamed, resolves to cut all ties with his former son. Meanwhile, Aftab becomes Anjum, eventually to become Delhi's most famous Hijra. She is coveted by NGO's and journalists, who assume her traditional Muslim family has abused her. She responds that she was the one who had been cruel.

Finally, at the Khwabgah, Anjum is able to dress the way she's always dreamed of. She gets her nose pierced and wears elaborate feminine clothes, pulling her short hair back and weaving it into a braid of extensions. On Anjum's 18th birthday, Kulsoom Bi throws her a party, and, that night, she dreams that she is "a new bride on her wedding night." To her dismay, she wakes up to find that she had an orgasm during the night, and came onto her new red sari. Dismayed, Anjum speaks with Kulsoom Bi, who comforts her saying that Hijras are bodies "in which a Holy Soul lives." Kulsoom Bi also encourages Anjum to undergo gender transition surgery, saying that it is not against Islam.

Anjum decides to have the surgery with Dr. Mukhtar, who works with many of the residents of the Khwabgah. After removing her penis, Anjum feels much better physically. Dr. Mukhtar also gives Anjum pills that "undepen her voice" but also give it "a peculiar, rasping quality, which sometimes sound[s] like two voices quarreling with each other instead of one." In this state, with her "patched up body parts," Anjum lives in the *Khwabgah* for 30 years—until, suddenly, she announces that she wants to leave.

Here, readers realize that Aftab's positive perspective on the Khwabgah and on Hijras in the previous passage is largely born of naivete. When Aftab himself begins to experience his body behaving in ways that conflict with his gender identity, he understands the deep internal conflict Nimmo has spoken of. His choice to move outside of the Duniya, the real world, demonstrates that he has fully recognized himself as a marginalized person, and chosen to embrace both the joys and challenges of that experience.



Here, Jahanara's dedication to her child contrasts with Mulaqat Ali's refusal to acknowledge Anjum. Jahanara highlights how an acceptance of social difference fosters greater social connection, while Mulaqat's insistence on adhering to social norms and structures isolates him from his own child.



Kulsoom Bi's optimistic interpretation of what it means to be a Hijra contrasts with the Indo-Pak metaphor that Nimmo shared with Anjum. Kulsoom Bi's attitude demonstrates her celebration of the Hijra identity, which is even based on her Muslim faith. The fact that she needs to tell Anjum that the surgery is not against Islam suggests that there are people who argue that it is. Kulsoom Bi, then, has developed an interpretation of her own religion that is inclusive rather than exclusionary, welcoming of difference rather than punishing of it.



Here, the medicine that makes Anjum's voice sound like "two voices quarreling with each other instead of one" further emphasizes the idea that Hijras are constantly at war within themselves, experiencing their own version of Indo-Pak. Anjum has chosen to get the surgery to come closer to presenting as and feeling like a woman, but the effect the pills have on her voice render her someone forever in between worlds and identities, unable to fit into any specific category.



When Anjum announces that she wants to leave the Khwabgah, no one takes her seriously at first. Even she herself isn't sure why she does, but she fantasizes about living in her own home, being a mother to Zainab, and living "like an ordinary person." She wonders, though, if a life like that is "reasonable [...] on the part of someone like herself."

Zainab is the person Anjum loves most in this world, whom she finds one day, an abandoned baby, on the steps in front of a mosque. Anjum offers the baby a finger to grasp, and Zainab responds. This shocks Anjum, as "being ignored instead of dreaded by the tiny creature subdue[s] what Nimmo [...] call[s] Indo-Pak." Adoring the feeling of acceptance, Anjum brings the baby home to the Khwabgah. She makes public announcements that a baby has been found, but, to her relief, no one responds. Zainab comes to call Anjum "Mummy," and grows into a stubborn "bandicoot-like" little girl.

Unfamiliar with the rites of motherhood, Anjum spoils Zainab at first. Discovering Zainab's love for animals, Anjum gifts her a baby goat. When Zainab grows older, Anjum begins to tell her bedtime stories based on her own life, that are "entirely inappropriate for a young child." Soon, though, Anjum learns to modify the stories to be child-appropriate. For instance, she euphemizes the "Flyover Story"—a time when the police attacked a party where Anjum and other Hijras were gathering and threatened to arrest them all for prostitution if they didn't run home, and Anjum had to pee on a flyover—into a story where Anjum simply gets caught in the rain and goes pee outside. In this way, "Anjum beg[ins] to rewrite a simpler, happier life for herself."

When Zainab turns five, Anjum takes her to have singing lessons with Ustad Hameed, her old music teacher. Sadly, the little girl has no talent for music, but does have a real passion for animals. Anjum gifts her with a rooster in addition to the goat, and, when it comes time, registers her for school. (Anjum's brother, Saqib, and his wife are the official parents.) Sadly, Zainab falls too ill to go to school. She gets malaria, and then two bouts of viral fever. Worried, Anjum wonders if someone has put a hex on Zainab. She suspects Saeeda, a younger *Hijra* who is more modern than Anjum, who uses words like "transperson" and is Zainab's second-favorite in the Khwabgah.

In this moment, Anjum reckons with her desire to live in the Duniya as a "normal person," without being sure if that is possible for someone with her gender identity. This suggests that Anjum's choice to live outside of the Duniya isn't just a rejection of the real world, but also a response to its rejection of her.



Anjum's attachment to Zainab originates from the fact that the baby, unlike everyone else, does not reject Anjum or think that she is strange. From the description in the passage, readers can assume that Anjum longs to help others but fears that they will reject her assistance because of her Hijra identity. Zainab, of course, is unable to reject this assistance because she has not yet been indoctrinated into the norms that govern her society.



Anjum's desire to tell Zainab the truth about her life demonstrates a certain isolation on her part. The fact that she would share these stories even with a child who is too young to understand suggests that part of Anjum longs to be seen and understood for everything she is. This desire, perhaps, stems from the fact that she no longer has close relationships with any of her family members, and wants to create that tight-knit connection with her new child. Her assumptions that Zainab can handle the brutal reality of the violence Anjum has experienced might also stem from the fact that as a child, Anjum had to deal with challenges far beyond those that a normal child experiences due to her gender.



Anjum's relationship with Saeeda exemplifies the tension between the traditional Hijra community and their modern counterparts. Interestingly, Saeeda is characterized as sophisticated for her use of English words, which allow her to participate in the Hijra or trans community in a more global context. Anjum's clinging to the term Hijra, even though the word can be seen as offensive, can be interpreted not just as old-fashioned stubbornness but as a form of retaining the integrity of her language and culture.



In addition to possibly hexing Zainab, Saeeda has also stolen Anjum's spot as the most famous Hijra in Delhi. Her modern image and ability to switch between Western and traditional clothes better suits "the image of the New India—a nuclear power and an emerging destination for international finance." An aging Ustad Kulsoom Bi sees the benefits of including members like this in the Khwabgah, and Saeeda is neck-to-neck with Anjum for replacing Kulsoom Bi as head of the house.

One day, Anjum hears commotion in the Khwabgah and, fearing the worst, runs downstairs with Zainab. What she discovers is that the two commercial airlines have crashed into tall buildings in a city called New York. Anjum suspects that the hex Saeeda has put on Zainab has made the whole world sick, but she is the only one blaming a local Hijra for the attacks. Instead, Muslim communities across the world are persecuted. In India, political parties espousing the belief that India ought to be a Hindu republic rise to power. The "Poet-Prime Minister" makes a speech in which he says "The Mussalman, he doesn't like the Other [...] His Faith he wants to spread through Terror."

Anjum sees on the news that "all the prisons [are] full of young Muslim men" and "thank[s] the Almighty that Zainab [is] a girl. It [is] so much safer." Meanwhile, Zainab's health does not improve, and Anjum ultimately seeks the advice of a Muslim religious leader, who advises her to visit the shrine of Hazrat Gharib Nawaz in Ajmer. So, once Zainab has gotten a little better, Anjum resolves to make the trip with Zakir Mian, an old friend of her father's, "too old to be embarrassed about being seen travelling with a Hijra." He suggests that they visit the shrine of Wali Dakhani, an Urdu poet whom Mulaqat loved.

The two set off for Ajmer, and, for the first three days, Anjum calls the Khwabgah every day to check on Zainab. After the third day, the residents don't hear from her, but they do see on television terrible news from Gujarat: 60 Hindu pilgrims have been burned alive in a train. Politicians declare it "the work of Pakistani terrorists," and an "unofficial spokesperson announce[s] unofficially that every action [will] be met with an equal and opposite reaction." This triggers an unprecedented chain reaction of Hindu extremist groups wearing **saffron** headbands murdering Muslims, attacking them in their homes and shops and on pilgrimages and even in the hospital.

In this moment, Roy further explores Saeeda's choice to express herself in a modern or Western way. Although readers may be unlikely to suspect that Hijras, who exists on the margins of society, would be affected by or even participate in the rise of globalization in India, it is clear that Saeeda's way of expressing herself is a byproduct of globalization, of India's increased participation with the English-speaking world.



This moment marks the beginning of increased discrimination against Muslims in India, which continues throughout the novel. The "Poet Prime-Minister," an extremist whose "poetry" most often takes the form of propaganda, delivers an ironic speech. That he would blatantly single out Muslims for their apparent lack of religious tolerance belies his own total lack of acceptance of people of the Muslim faith in India. He leverages the 9/11 attacks to justify further violence against Muslims in his own country, even though they clearly have nothing to do with the events in New York.



Anjum's gratitude that Zainab is a girl is another moment in the story where the assumptions society makes about gender—that the masculine is inherently better than the feminine—is challenged. Furthermore, Roy's observation that Zakir Mian is "too old" to be embarrassed about Anjum's gender identity suggests that strong attachment to societal norms is something to be outgrown; the older and wiser someone is, the less particular they become about judging whether or not those around them are socially acceptable or marginalized.



In this moment, the government's persecution of India's Muslim population becomes almost explicit. The fact that an "unofficial" spokesperson was given the airtime and media attention necessary to make such a declaration demonstrates the extent to which the government has little to no investment in serving or protecting the Muslim population. Furthermore, the phrase "equal and opposite" is woefully inaccurate in this case. The murders and attacks the Hindu extremists commit against the Muslim population far outweigh the original attack on Hindus.



Worried, Saeeda suggests that they keep the news on at the Khwabgah to see if they can find out what has happened to Anjum and Zakir Mian, whom they haven't heard from. They look closely at footage of Muslim refugee camps in Gujarat to see if they can glimpse either. On TV, they learn that the shrine of Wali Dakhani has been razed to make room for a tarred road. Even so, pilgrims continue to leave flowers in the middle of the road where the shrine used to be.

The Khwabgah goes two months without hearing anything from Anjum. By that time, “the murdering [has] grown sporadic,” and Mansoor, Zakir Mian’s son, goes to Ahmedabad to see if he can find his father. On the way, he wears red puja threads to try and pass for Hindu. He never finds Zakir Mian, and instead learns that he has been murdered. He finds Anjum in the men’s section of a refugee camp—dressed in men’s clothing and with a short haircut—and brings her back home. After hugging a delighted Zainab, the first thing Anjum does upon returning to the *Khwabgah* is change into her preferred feminine clothes and put on makeup. She is subdued, and doesn’t seem happy to see the women of the *Khwabgah*. She is particularly unhappy that Zainab has begun to call Saeeda “Mummy” as well.

Anjum’s strange mood lasts for many weeks. She teaches Zainab a strange chant that nobody knows—the Gayatri Mantra, that she learned in the refugee camp at Gujarat. She says it is good to know for mob situations, so that Zainab can pass for Hindu if she needs to. One day, Anjum even gives Zainab a haircut and dresses her in boy’s clothes, explaining to the perplexed members of the Khwabgah that “it’s safer like this.”

Ustad Kulsoom Bi does not like what Anjum has done with Zainab, and calls an emergency meeting. She speaks proudly of the history of the Khwabgah, reminding her fellow Hijras of their ancestors’ important role with Mughal royals in the historical Red Court. She reminds them of a sound and light show at the modern-day Red Court, in which at one point listeners can distinctly hear “the deep, distinct, rasping, coquettish giggle of a court eunuch.” Ustad Kulsoom Bi adores this part of the installation, for “to be present in history, even as nothing more than a chuckle, [is] a universe away from being absent from it, from being written out of it altogether.” Anjum remembers the time she herself went to see the installation, and a tourist asked to take her picture—it was the first time she was photographed.

The fact that pilgrims continue to leave flowers on the asphalt road in front of the shrine is a clear example of resilience and hope in the face of tyranny and the threat of violence. The flowers that they leave on the road get run over every day, but the pilgrims consistently replace them. The government’s choice to raze a popular Muslim shrine further demonstrates its willful oppression and persecution of the Muslim population.



Here, Mansoor feels so unsafe for potentially looking like a Muslim that he shaves his beard—an important religious symbol in his faith—and, further, goes so far as to wear puja threads, traditionally associated with Hinduism. This demonstrates the extent to which the Indian state has made it clear that it will not protect Muslims. Mansoor clearly fears for his life, and so disguises himself as a member of another religion. Additionally, the fact that Anjum has been forced to present as masculine while in the refugee camp demonstrates mainstream society’s refusal to accept people with her gender identity.



Anjum’s choice to teach Zainab the Gayatri Mantra is similar to Mansoor’s choice to wear puja threads. Although these religious symbols mean nothing to the Muslim characters, Anjum and Mansoor are so terrified by the lawless persecution that their people face that they adopt religious behaviors that have nothing to do with their own beliefs.



Here, Kulsoom Bi and Anjum both celebrate moments in which they have felt acknowledged. Kulsoom Bi’s reflection on the importance of documentation speaks to the very real fear that many marginalized populations have of being erased from history. A form of oppression that Roy interrogates at length in the novel is the use of language and narrative control on the part of oppressors to make sure the marginalized population’s narrative will never be told and, consequently, will never be recognized as truth. The threat of this erasure is what causes Kulsoom Bi to celebrate something so small as the recording of a giggle that sounds like a Hijra.



Anjum's attention returns to the meeting, where Ustad Kulsoom Bi continues to speak proudly of the legacy of Hijras in India. She reminds the other girls that the Khwabgah is a place where "Holy Souls trapped in the wrong bodies [are] liberated." But, she emphasizes, the key principle of the *Khwabgah* is *manzoori*, or "consent." She reminds everyone that in the Duniya, people spread rumors that *Hijras* capture and castrate young boys. In keeping with the principle of consent, she says, Anjum cannot oblige Zainab to present as a boy, even if she thinks it makes her safer.

Anjum protests, insisting that Zainab is her child and she will do as she pleases with her, threatening to leave the Khwabgah with Zainab. Ustad Kulsoom Bi responds that the Anjum can go wherever she wants, but the child will stay in the *Khwabgah*. At first, Anjum's threat to leave is mostly rhetorical, but as time passes, she begins to truly consider leaving her home of the past 30 years.

Thinking Anjum is crazy for wanting to leave, the women of the Khwabgah go and visit Dr. Bhagat, a doctor who prescribes many of them with mental health medication. Fearing (erroneously) that the Hindu doctor will not understand that Anjum may be traumatized from what she experienced at the refugee camp, Saeeda doesn't mention that Anjum was present in Gujarat, but does tell the doctor about Anjum's anxiety and crazy desire to leave the *Khwabgah*. The doctor prescribes Anjum a medication, which she refuses to take.

Growing increasingly restless and unhappy, Anjum burns Dr. Bhagat's prescription, along with a collection of photographs and articles of her that she has collected over the years, scaring Zainab so much that she moves all her things to Saeeda's room. Heartbroken, Anjum packs a few of her things—her cupboard, two suits, and a pair of men's shoes—and leaves the Khwabgah, headed for the graveyard behind the government hospital, where many of her family members are buried.

Kulsoom Bi's insistence upon maintaining the integrity of the Khwabgah and of Hijras' reputation in Delhi also stems from her desire to maintain control of the cultural narratives that are told about Hijras. Because the Hijra population is so marginalized and, consequently, so vulnerable, Kulsoom Bi feels an extra obligation to uphold the moral integrity of the Khwabgah and everyone who lives there.



In this moment, Anjum's true independence shines through. Her rebellious spirit prevents her from compromising on what she believes to be right, no matter what the consequences may be—and, in this case, losing her child, whom she has described as the person she loves most in the world, is a steep price to pay for freedom. She is willing to marginalize herself even further from society, leaving behind the only community that will accept her, in order to live by her own rules.



The women's relationship with Dr. Bhagat is interesting, as they seem to depend entirely upon him for their health care, and many of them take medication from him for their mental health. Roy never explicitly implies that the doctor pathologizes transgender people, but the fact that so many of the Hijras are so dependent upon the medication he prescribes invites readers to consider whether the doctor has pathologized their gender identity. The other interpretation, of course, would be that as marginalized people, living in a world that doesn't respect them causes Hijras in particular to have poor mental health.



In this moment, Anjum first departs for the graveyard, where she is at the beginning of the novel. Anjum's choice to move to a graveyard, where people go to die rather than to live, suggests that she wishes to withdraw even more extremely from the Duniya. She is completely isolating herself from the rest of the world, which, presumably, has caused her so much pain—for both her religion and her gender identity—that she no longer wishes to participate in it.



Anjum sets up her belongings next to her father's grave, among the "smack addicts" and stray dogs that populate the graveyard. Normally, she would be in danger in such a situation, but "her desolation protect[s] her." Alone with her mind, she tries to shut out memories of what happened to her and Zakir Mian, but is unable to. She remembers how the Hindu extremists, "saffron parakeets with steel talons and bloodied beaks," murdered everyone around her, tore them limb from limb and set them on fire. She remembers how she had feigned death but was discovered, only to be spared because "killing Hijras brings bad luck." Indeed, the murderers seemed to be preoccupied with not acquiring bad luck—their "wrists wielding iron rods that bludgeoned people to death were festooned with red puja threads lovingly tied by adoring mothers."

Instead of killing her, the mob simply made her "chant their slogans," and Anjum remembers repeating "Victory to Mother India!" While she suffers with her traumas in the graveyard, Anjum receives no visitors at first, but D.D. Gupta, a client of hers at the Khwabgah who works in construction in Iraq, comes to visit her before moving to Baghdad. When he visits, he brings her a cell phone, which she doesn't use. Eventually, Saeeda brings Zainab a few times, Ustad Kulsoom Bi visits and gives Anjum an allowance from the Khwabgah, and even Saqib comes once a week. Ustad Hameed comes and sings for Anjum, which he knows to be possibly one of her only sources of joy in those difficult moments. Still, Anjum won't be convinced to return to the Khwabgah.

Over the years, Anjum's grief subsides—her memories of the saffron parakeets of Gujarat dim and of Zakir Mian "will not go away" but become "a constant but undemanding companion." As she heals, Anjum begins to present as a woman again, dying her hair with henna and replacing a dead tooth with a shiny, new implant. Meanwhile, she transforms her tiny shack in the graveyard into a real house, painting the walls fuchsia and even building a little kitchen. Saeeda and Zainab begin to visit again, and although Anjum is devastated at the permanent wound in their relationships, she is glad the child feels comfortable around her again. When authorities challenge Anjum's right to live in the graveyard, she protests, saying she isn't living there—she is dying there. The officers, who fear being cursed by a Hijra, leave her alone, allowing her to stay there for a small fee.

The revelation that Anjum's Hijra identity has protected her from death adds another layer of complexity to Roy's exploration of gender and privilege. Hijras are both looked down upon and feared, and in this way Anjum's identity as a marginalized person is, in some ways, a social position of power and protection. The fact that the Hindu mobs are willing to murder thousands and yet fear acquiring bad luck for killing one Hijra is blatantly ironic. It demonstrates the extent to which religious extremism has prevented the mob from recognizing the humanity of their Muslim compatriots. Because their religious beliefs teach them that it is bad luck to kill Hijras, they don't; and yet because their religious and political leaders either implicitly or explicitly condone the murder of Muslim citizens, they do.



The mob forcing Anjum to repeat their slogans may have been Anjum's inspiration for teaching Zainab the Gayatri Mantra. In both cases, language functions as a tool to disguise marginalized populations. Although Anjum has chosen to withdraw from the world in order to process her trauma, it is clear from the large quantity of people that visit her that she will never be able to sever her real-world connections. Because of her loved ones' dedication, Anjum is able to begin building a community even from such a marginalized position.



Over the course of the novel, Anjum changes her presentation of gender to reflect her overall wellbeing. Her presentation as a male when she first arrives in the graveyard is a reflection of her grief and trauma, whereas her gradual return to presenting as female reflects her slow but deliberate healing process as she begins to work through the trauma she suffered at Gujarat. The detail about the authorities charging Anjum a small fee to live in the graveyard speaks to the commonality of corruption among the Indian authorities—Anjum, and presumably anyone else, is able to get around the law, as long as she pays.



With time, Anjum's home grows and grows. Imam Ziauddin eventually moves in permanently, and Anjum builds rooms over the graves of several of her relatives nearby. What's more, her house starts functioning as a guesthouse—obviously, not too many people are interested in spending the night in the graveyard, and Anjum won't let in just anyone, so business isn't exactly booming. But still, her house and the community she forms around it slowly grows. She names the guest house Jannat, meaning "paradise." Because she steals electricity from the mortuary, "where the corpses required round-the-clock refrigeration," Anjum suffers no power cuts and keeps the TV on day and night, learning much about modern politics.

Many of Anjum's guests are other Hijras who have "fallen out of, or been expelled from, the tightly administered grid of Hijra Gharanas." Among these is Nimmo, who over the years has become a large, beautiful woman and the owner of a successful business that sells goats for slaughter on particularly on Eid (a Muslim religious feast commemorating the end of Ramadan, a month of fasting.) Nimmo gifts Anjum with a beautiful ram to rear and slaughter for Eid one year. She raises him with great care, as she believes "love, after all, is the ingredient that separates a sacrifice from ordinary, everyday butchery."

That Eid, Anjum hires a popular butcher to perform the sacrifice. Anjum dresses as a man to take on the role of "Man of the House" and is the one to say the traditional prayer before the ram's throat is slit. She distributes "little parcels of mutton [...] in the way it is Written: a third for the family, a third for nears and dears, a third for the poor." For Eid, Anjum, Nimmo, Imam Ziauddin, and all of the addicts in the graveyard eat very well. Nimmo gifts Anjum a mobile phone, which, unlike the phone D.D. Gupta gifted her, she keeps.

The next morning, a second permanent guest arrives at Jannat Guest House: a young man who has dubbed himself Saddam Hussain. Anjum takes a liking to him, and offers him extremely cheap rent. Saddam works at the mortuary handling cadavers, as the upper-caste Hindu doctors whose legal job it is to perform post-mortems feel that they are above the task. Saddam and the others who perform his job are part of a caste called Chamars, whom the doctors think of as Untouchable. When he arrives to stay for good at Jannat Guest House, he has just been fired from his job after a fight with a doctor. He comes along with a white mare named Payal, and wears sunglasses, even indoors.

Anjum's choice of name for her new home and guest house has an interesting double meaning. Naming it "paradise" suggests that she and the other inhabitants are no longer living and have gone to heaven, which speaks to Anjum's total departure from the Duniya, or the "real world." But secondly, calling the home paradise reflects Anjum's high opinion of the home she has created for herself and will create for others. It is as if there, on the margins of a hellish and violent society, she has created a safe haven where she and others like her can be safe and happy.



"Butchery" is also the language Anjum uses to describe the murders of Muslim pilgrims to Gujarat, and so her use of this term to describe the holy sacrifice of an Eid ram draws attention. She may be suggesting that the lack of love on the part of Hindu extremists for their Muslim compatriots is what makes possible such mass, thoughtless violence.



Anjum and Nimmo's active participation in Muslim religious ceremonies stands in silent protest to the members of society that believe being a Hijra goes against Islam. The fact that Anjum feels she has to present as a man in order to perform the ritual sacrifice is interesting, and suggests that she values the teachings and rules of Islam more than her own right to present as the gender that she wants, in the context that she wants to. By demonstrating that she is willing to make a sacrifice, so to speak, by not presenting as her preferred gender, Anjum demonstrates deep respect for her faith.



The Brahmin doctors' insistence on making low-caste members of society perform post-mortems demonstrates the extent to which class oppression affects Indian society. Being a doctor is a prestigious job, which mostly upper-caste people have access to. And yet, their strong identification with being high caste prevents them from literally doing the prestigious jobs they have been hired for. It is unlikely that untrained staff are as qualified to perform accurate post-mortems as the doctors are. But because caste is so powerful in India, the doctors value establishing their authority and dominance over other castes more than they value doing their job.



Saddam tells Anjum the story of how he burned his eyes looking at a tree. Previously, he was employed as a security guard at Safe n' Sound Guard Service—where he used the name Dayachand, as no one would trust a Muslim security guard—when he was assigned to guard an art exhibition in which everything was made of steel. He was tasked with staring at a steel tree all day, making sure visitors did not touch it. However, the sunlight reflecting off of the metal burned his eyes, and when he asked for permission to wear sunglasses, he was denied because it looked unprofessional. After several weeks, Saddam's eyes were permanently damaged, and he couldn't open them in daylight without sunglasses, which he was fired for wearing. Upon leaving, he cursed at his boss, and Anjum laughs when he tells her what names he called his employer.

Now unemployed, Saddam supports himself with a few odd jobs. For instance, he takes his horse Payal and stations outside of hospitals, pretending to be re-shoeing her. Superstitious Hindu relatives of the ill want to take the old horseshoe for good luck, and Saddam happily sells them. He also sells medication to poor people from villages who are tended to in Delhi's government hospitals.

Saddam soon partners with Anjum and Imam Ziauddin to begin another odd job when Anwar Bhai, the owner of a nearby brothel, arrives at Jannat with the dead body of one of his girls, Rubina. Anwar is unhappy for many reasons—Rubina's eyes are missing, and, because of her profession, none of the graveyards in Delhi are willing to bury her. Sensing a business opportunity, Saddam tells Anwar that he's come to the right place. The other sex workers that worked with Rubina begin preparing her body for the funeral, bathing, drying, and perfuming her. Two addicts help Saddam to dig a grave, and Imam Ziauddin says the prayers. Although initially both Anjum and Saddam refuse the 500 rupees Anwar offers them for the service, Saddam is “not one to pass up a business opportunity,” and the very next week Jannat Guest House begins to double as a funeral parlor.

As expected, Jannat Guest House and Funeral Services isn't the typical funeral parlor. Indeed, like guests, Anjum either warmly welcomes or roaringly rejects petitions from those who want to be buried on her land. Her only “clear criterion” is that Anjum is only willing to bury “those whom the graveyards and imams of the Duniya [have] rejected.” Even the police, “whose rules [are] as irrational as Anjum's” sometimes bring bodies to Jannat. Ustad Kulsoom Bi eventually is buried in Anjum's graveyard, along with many other Delhi Hijras. (This is how Imam Ziauddin finally receives the answer to the question he asks at the beginning of the story about where *Hijras* go to die.)

Saddam's frank explanation that he chose to use the name Dayachand when he worked as a security guard because no one trusts Muslims show just how discriminated against and criminalized the Muslim population has become in India. What's more, the fact that his boss would allow him to sustain a permanent injury on the job speaks to the widespread issue of class oppression. If low-caste, working-class people were respected, Saddam would have workers' rights that would prevent such a thing from happening. But the combination of the caste system and capitalism creates a system under which his body is seen as a disposable tool.



Perhaps because he has previously felt so oppressed by upper-caste Hindu members of society, Saddam chooses an odd job that takes advantage of their religious beliefs to rob them of their money. Just as Saddam has been taken advantage of by upper-caste Hindus' participation in capitalism, he will take advantage of them to make money himself.



The disrespect Rubina's body faces shows how discriminatory mainstream society is against sex workers. The implication is that Rubina's eyes were forcibly removed, out of disrespect for her and her profession, during the autopsy process. Because of Anjum's commitment to providing a safe haven for the marginalized, beginning to provide funeral services for those who are deemed too unclean by the religious institutions that normally perform funerals is a natural business opportunity for her. In this way, by honoring with ceremony the deaths of those deemed unworthy of celebration by mainstream society, Anjum begins to create an even more expansive community for herself and others on society's fringes.



Imam Ziauddin's willingness to participate in the ceremony marks a change in consciousness for him—at the beginning of the novel, he asked Anjum where “people like her go to die” and at this point in the story readers realize he was referring to Hijras when he said “people like you.” Clearly, spending so much time around Anjum and other marginalized people has inspired him to have a change of heart, recognizing that even people who do not fit into the norms prescribed by society or even Islam are worthy of a respectful send-off when they leave this lifetime.



Anjum and Saddam live together, but don't spend much time in one another's company. Anjum likes to spend her days watching television, and on the news she learns that, in spite of the moderate but puppet-like Sikh president, Hindu conservative extremist groups are gaining power again. Gujarat ka Lalla is the Chief Minister of Gujarat and "talk[s] a lot about avenging centuries of Muslim Rule." One Independence Day, Anjum is watching the news and listens to a speech given by the Sikh president, according to Anjum, "speak[s] like a marionette."

Saddened by the rise of the political right in her country, Anjum goes outside with Saddam and Biroo, their dog, to enjoy some tea. She begins to tell Saddam the "Flyover Story" that Zainab had loved when she was a little girl, and, suddenly, has the realization that she was "born to be a mother," which she shares with Saddam. But Saddam is doubtful, and asks her how that would be possible; he reminds her that "there is, after all, such a thing as Reality." Angrily, Anjum challenges him, saying, "Once you have fallen off the edge like all of us have [...] you will never stop falling. And as you fall you will hold on to other falling people [...] The place where we live, where we have made our home, is the place of falling people [...] We don't really exist."

Out of affection for Anjum, Saddam doesn't push the conversation further. Indeed, in that moment, he realizes she's the person he loves most in the world. After some silence, Anjum asks him why he calls himself Saddam Hussain. He reveals that the story has to do with "saffron parakeets and a dead cow." His real name is Dayachand, and he comes from a family of Chamars, or members of the Untouchable caste. One day, he went with his father to collect a cow that had died on an upper-caste man's property—members of the upper-caste wouldn't dirty themselves by touching dead cows. Collecting these bodies was Saddam's father's profession.

The implication that the Sikh president speaks like a marionette invites readers to wonder who is controlling him. No matter who is behind the operation, a president who functions as a puppet of another organization is a clear sign of corruption in the country. The prevalence of Gujarat-ka-Lalla, who originally called for revenge against Muslims in response to the attacks on Hindus in Gujarat, warns of the rise of a far-right, religious extremist political movement.



Here, Anjum makes clear the philosophy behind her work with Jannat Guest House and Funeral Services. She sees herself as already "fallen," completely outside of the rules of the Duniya and mainstream society. Her use of the verb "fall" seems to mean "fail to conform." She references her status as someone who doesn't conform to society to challenge the limiting beliefs Saddam Hussain has created surrounding her chances at motherhood. Because he is still trapped in mainstream thinking, he believes someone like Anjum doesn't have access to motherhood. But Anjum seems to be saying that because she doesn't conform to society's rules and expectations in any way, she cannot be limited by them.



Saddam's former job performing post-mortems is very similar to his deceased father's job in disposing of cow carcasses. That an Untouchable father and son would both perform similarly low-caste professions demonstrates how ingrained the caste system is in Indian society, and how strongly it prevents upward mobility. What's more, Saddam's real name, Dayachand, is a Hindu name—the one he used to pretend to be Hindu when he worked as a security guard. This suggests that he has converted from Hinduism perhaps in response to the caste-related oppression that he and his father have experienced.



On that day, the community was celebrating Dussehra, a festival that celebrates Hindu gods vanquishing evil demons. (“Audacious scholars” believe this festival might have been based on Aryan invaders vanquishing the indigenous rulers of the land.) As Saddam and his father were driving back with the cow carcass, they came across an official, whom they usually bribed, who asked them that day for more money. Saddam’s father couldn’t pay, so the official had his father arrested for cow-slaughter. After the festivities, a mob gathered in front of the police station, demanding that the “cow-killers” be handed over to them. Fearing for his life, Saddam mingled with the crowd. The police acquiesced, and the crowd beat Saddam’s father to death. He remembers how the crowd “splashed through puddles of his father’s blood as if it were rainwater,” and says to Anjum, “I was part of the mob that killed my father.”

Hearing Saddam’s words, Anjum remembers her traumatic experience with a Hindu extremist mob. Saddam goes on to say how shortly after his father was killed, his mother also died, and how he stole money from an uncle to come to Delhi. This was where he saw the video of Saddam Hussain’s hanging. Saddam was so impressed by the other Saddam’s stoicism when he was killed that he resolved to become a Muslim and take his name. Saddam says he wants to be like his chosen namesake: willing to pay the price for doing what he feels he has to do. Anjum tells Saddam that she has a friend who lives in Iraq, and shares with Saddam photos that D. D. Gupta has sent her. One of these is graffiti of the words of an American army general: “Be professional, be polite, and have a plan to kill everybody you meet.”

Once they have finished talking, Anjum and Saddam go back inside, where they “continue[] to float through their lives like a pair of astronauts,” although not without plans. Anjum wants to die, while Saddam wants to kill the official that condemned his father to death. Meanwhile, miles away, “in a troubled forest, a baby wait[s] to be born...”

Roy’s characterization of scholars who challenge the moral integrity of Hindu ceremonies is ominous. It suggests that scholars need to have courage to have opinions that don’t align with those of the mainstream religious majority—something that, in a true democracy, shouldn’t happen. That the police released a prisoner to a demanding mob is only further evidence of the Indian government’s corruption. Even though the police officially should protect citizens of all castes and religions, their own deeply ingrained beliefs that Untouchable lives don’t matter allows them to fail to do their job. It should be the police who administer justice, not a violent mob, and yet their bias against low-caste people allows them to ignore this responsibility.



Saddam Hussain’s admiration from his chosen namesake only goes to show how his own government and society has failed him. The real Saddam Hussein is an antagonist in mainstream narratives of world politics. But the protagonists or “good guys” that the character Saddam Hussain has been taught to recognize in mainstream society have failed him. The high-caste Brahmins that he has been taught to admire disrespect and take advantage of him and his father. The police, an authority figure he was likely raised to respect, turn his father over to a mob that kills him. The lack of positive experiences with “good guys” in his own society allows Saddam Hussain to admire and want to replicate someone internationally recognized as a “bad guy,” so to speak, because Saddam has lost faith in the system to administer justice.



The comparison of Anjum and Saddam’s lives to those of “astronauts” further emphasizes their almost total isolation from the goings-on of the real world and mainstream society.



CHAPTER 3

In another corner of the city, at midnight, a baby appears on the concrete. She has “blue-black” skin, and, although wide awake, is silent—perhaps because “in those first short months of her life, she ha[s] already learned that tears, *her* tears at least, [are] futile.” Around her, the city sprawls out, at the “dawn of her resurrection. Her new masters want[] 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 [...] It [is] the summer Grandma [becomes] a whore.” As India is on its way to becoming a global superpower, international companies like Kmart and Starbucks arrive in Delhi. One particular British Airways commercial even features a diverse cast chanting the Gayatri Mantra, ending with “And may everyone fly BA.”

Meanwhile, though, the poor of the city are being dislocated. A Supreme Court judge has declared that people who can’t afford to live in cities shouldn’t live in Delhi, instigating the mass removal of the city’s slums and “surplus people.” But the poor of the city fight back, armed with sticks and rocks, to defend the “unauthorized” settlements where they live. Without anywhere to go, many of them tell the government that they can kill them, but they won’t move. Unfortunately for the government, “there [are] too many of them to be killed outright.”

The conflict between the poor and the government causes the city to break under the tension, in what is supposed to be the summer of its “renewal.” Scores of young reporters roam the city streets “asking urgent, empty questions; they ask[] the poor what it [is] like to be poor, the hungry what it [is] like to be hungry, the homeless what it [is] like to be homeless.” In spite of the work of journalists, however, the beggars are shipped out of the city (only to be shipped back in by their contractors) and 3,000 unidentified human bodies are found on the street, with no response from the government. Meanwhile, the economy is booming, and “people (who count[] as people)” find the surplus of shopping items available remarkable.

Presumably, because the baby is “blue-black” she is of low-caste, and this status might be why her tears, in particular, are futile. Low-caste tears are ignored by the society and by the government. By contrast, the government is busy trying to market itself to the world—the metaphor that compares India to an elderly woman plays off of the idea that under gender oppression, women are like objects to be bought and sold. This metaphor also suggests that the city has real problems, analogous to the grandmother’s described health problems, that it wants to pretend do not exist in order to attract foreign investors and tourists. The detail about the commercial in which people sign the Gayatri Mantra suggests that the world is blind to the religious-based violence that occurs in India. The only other context in which the Gayatri Mantra appears is when Anjum teaches it to Zainab so she may protect herself from a Hindu extremist crowd. It is clear that the actors in the commercial, and the audience whom the commercial seeks to target, have no idea that an apparently peaceful, spiritual mantra could be associated with a violently oppressive religious majority.



Here, the reason that the government provides for not killing the poor citizens of Delhi—simply that they are too many—reveals that it blatantly does not care about the lower-class, lower-caste residents. What’s more, the fact that there even are so many poor people to get rid of demonstrates the government’s failure to care for all of its people in the first place.



Roy’s mockery of the young journalists in this passage is the beginning of an extensive critique of the media’s role in corruption. In this moment, it is clear that the reporters have no genuine interest in helping the poor; rather, they seek to exploit their narratives of struggle and hunger to gain viewership. This type of journalism is sensationalist, and will do nothing to alleviate the struggles of the people covered in the stories. Additionally, the detail that the beggars are shipped out of the city only to be shipped back in by contractors further emphasizes the level of corruption and economic exploitation of the working class.



Still, the poor who've been evicted from the city haven't all left. Many of them peddle goods like pirated management and self-help books to the rich as they sit in comfortable, air-conditioned cars at traffic lights. The poor that have left live on the city's outskirts, among the pollution of plastic bags and human waste, where the air and water alike are poisonous.

At the observatory where the baby first appears, thousands of protestors for various causes, along with over 20 TV crews, have gathered around a new public figure. A fat old Gandhian has committed to fasting to the death in protest of the level of corruption in India. Being broadcast to the whole nation, he lies in front of a portrait of Mother India, which is "a many-armed goddess with a map-of-India-shaped body." Indeed, that summer has seen more than its fair share of government scams, in which "businessmen-politicians and politician-businessmen" have "made off with unimaginable amounts of public money." So the old man's protest is a hit, and huge groups of young professionals come in "jeans and t-shirts" to protest corruption alongside him. Even policemen, former government officials, and army officers participate.

Thrilled by his "instant stardom," the old man begins to state his opinions on matters beyond just corruption. He has something for everyone: Hindu chauvinists, Muslims, members of the lowest castes. When he says something to please one group that offends another, a select member of the offended group is invited to appear beside him on TV. This way, everyone is happy—and television viewership "skyrockets. Advertising roll[s] in." When the old man begins to weaken from his hunger strike, "luminaries" line up beside him and beg him not to die (although no one really believes he will).

Advertisers aren't the only ones to take advantage of the protester's popularity: Gujarat ka Lalla and his political party organize to be seen in supporting the anti-corruption protest. Funded by Hindu millionaires, they distribute free food to the poor. They do not wear their signature **saffron** clothing, nor do they even mention their leader by name. And their subtle strategy works: within a year, Lalla is elected prime minister.

The contrast between the realities of the rich and the poor is stark here. Roy's mention of self-help books is especially ironic, as it is clear to anyone that the people who really need help—and not self-help, but genuine aid from their government—are the ones outside the cars, not inside them.



Roy is intentional in emphasizing how the old Gandhian's protest is not radical at all, and instead perpetuates old myths and beliefs that are not of service to all people of the country. Firstly, the personification of India as a woman has sexist undertones. Secondly, the fact that this protest attracts the quintessential young professional suggests that it does not address the problem that Roy has demonstrated in the previous pages is most important in India: class oppression. The "jeans and T-shirts" are signs of relative class privilege, and suggest that those participating in the protest are still able to thrive under the government, no matter how corrupt it may be.



Here, the old man's willingness to try to please all groups only speaks to the lack of integrity behind his cause. No truly dedicated activist is thrilled by "instant stardom." The fact that the Gandhian is thrilled suggests that he may be just as corrupted as the government he is protesting against. Rather than accepting bribes, though, he is morally corrupt. He is willing to say anything to the camera, in order to remain as popular as possible within as many different groups as possible. Rather than choosing to use his position of power to advocate for meaningful change, he uses it to become a celebrity.



Gujarat ka Lalla—the politician who advocates for religious oppression and violence—takes advantage of the situation. Anti-corruption is a cause that can unite people of varying political beliefs, and Gujarat ka Lalla takes advantage of the populist movement—a common strategy of the far-right—to convert voters to his party.



Next to the anti-corruption canopy, which has space for thousands of people, another Gandhian activist is fasting to the death. Her cause is a bit more specific than the fat old man's: she is fasting on behalf of the farmers and indigenous peoples whose land rights the government has violated. Since big agriculture funds many TV channels, she's not nearly as popular as her neighbor activist on television, and instead is heavily insulted by the press. Still, the activists on the ground adore her, and do everything they can to help her. Around them are still more activists and protesters, one who has painted his whole body with superglue for reasons he will not explain; another "performance artist" who does nothing but wander through the crowds in an English bowler hat.

This is the sight that Anjum, Saddam Hussain, Ustad Hameed, Nimmo and their companion Ishrat, a visiting Hijra from Indore, see when they join the protest to help the poor. Nimmo has driven them all to the protests, which Saddam thinks are one big scam but where Anjum insists that they'll learn something. So insistent is she on this possibility that she sends Saddam from activist to activist to gather information about what is being protested and why. Meanwhile, Ustad Hameed has no interest in what's being discussed, and young Ishrat spends the entire time taking selfies. At one point, a pair of filmmakers making a documentary against corruption is filming protesters saying into the camera, "Another world is possible." Anjum, instead of saying this, says, "We've come from there...from the other world." The filmmakers don't know what this means, but can't be bothered to try and find out.

Another group featured in the documentary is a handful of bald men who have taken a vow of silence until Hindi is declared the national language. The documentarians give them a sign to hold up that declares, "Another World Is Possible," while making sure to cut the group's arch-conservative signs demanding Hindi be the national language out of the frame. Beside them are people maimed in a gas leak caused by Union Carbide in Bhopal, demanding clean water and medical care. Since this is old news, no one pays attention. As part of their protest, they've gotten a small TV on which they show a clip of American Warren Anderson, CEO of Union Carbide Corporation, arriving in India after the leak. "I've just arrived," he tells journalists. "I don't know the details yet. So hey! Whaddya want me to say?" Then, waving into the camera, he says, "Hi Mom!"

In this passage, Roy further reveals the inauthenticity of the Gandhian's protest. The protest is against corruption, and yet one of the protest participants doesn't receive airtime, or receives only negative airtime, due to what is essentially corruption: the people she is protesting against own the TV channels. What's more, her protest is much more specific and seems much more urgent than the vague call to end corruption. The lack of attention she receives suggests that the type of activism that attracts the masses, media attention, and politicians' attention is more performative than it is sincere.



In this moment, the filmmakers' lack of interest in understanding what Anjum really means to say is evidence of their own superficiality, their lack of genuine interest in the causes being protested. In trying to convince everyone to say, "another world is possible," the filmmakers likely mean to encourage their viewers to believe in the possibility of a better world. So when Anjum says that she and her party have come from "the other world," readers can interpret that as meaning she has come from the better, different world that the documentarians are encouraging their viewers to imagine. In a way, this is true: Anjum comes from a tiny world in which the caste system, corruption, and other forms of oppression are simply non-issues.



The filmmakers' choice to ignore the causes that the participants in the video are protesting demonstrates their total lack of regard for any sort of activism. All those interviewed believe another world is possible, but the filmmakers clearly don't care what exactly they imagine happening in an ideal world. Meanwhile, the Union Carbide protestors seem to be advocating for a truly important cause, and are given no attention. It is almost as if there is an inverse relationship between the importance of the cause and the amount of media attention it receives. Finally, Warren Anderson's dismissive attitude about the carbon spill demonstrates the unimportance of Indian lives, particularly low-caste Indian lives, to the powerful people that are leaders in the globalist capitalism system.



At the protest site, a gleaming bathroom stands in stark contrast with the grimy, bleak surroundings. It costs “one rupee for a piss, two for a shit and three for a shower.” No one can afford that, so people pee on the wall of the toilet outside. Above the toilet is a billboard advertising the latest luxury Honda. The billboard has its own security guard, meant to protect it from vandalism, and the toilets have a guard too. He is Brahmin, though, and outsources his toilet-cleaning duties to another man who is a member of “what most Hindus overtly, and the government covertly, [think] of as the shit-cleaning caste.”

In front of the toilets are three more groups of protestors: Manipuri Nationalists advocating for the repeal of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, which allows the Indian Army “to kill on ‘suspicion,’” refugees from Tibet advocating for their country’s liberation, and, finally, the Association of Mothers of the Disappeared, whose sons have gone missing in the Kashmiri conflict. This last group receives absolutely no attention from television —like the gas leak victims, their story is old, and some of the mothers have grown bitter and jaded. Supporters of Gujarat ka Lalla tell the mothers that “Muslim Terrorists do not deserve Human Rights.”

The baby has appeared right next to the Mothers of the Disappeared. Because she is “the color of the night,” the mothers do not notice her at first—Kashmiri babies are white as “almond blossoms.” When the baby, who has stayed silent, finally cries out, one of the mothers picks her up and reads the note attached to her in English, which says, “I cannot look after this child. So I am leaving her here.” The mothers decide that the baby ought to be handed over to the police, but Anjum has a different idea and protests. But she is shut down by someone who jokes that giving a female baby over to a Hijra would be useless, as *Hijras* only have use for castrating male babies. Anjum, though, isn’t going down without a fight.

It is ironic that a businessman seeking to earn money has installed a toilet at a public protest where no one can afford to use it. This speaks to the working class’s lack of access to comfort, and the upper class’s lack of understanding of working-class needs. The Honda billboard is likely just as futile as the bathrooms; if the intended clientele can’t even afford one rupee to pee, how are they expected to purchase a luxury Honda? This passage demonstrates the ways in which the capitalism fails to benefit the masses.



In this moment, Gujarat ka Lalla’s supporters let their non-extremist masks slip a little bit when they declare, essentially, that Muslims do not deserve human rights. The far-right advocates automatically link the words “Muslim” and “terrorist,” even though there is no evidence from the rest of this passage that the missing children or their mothers are terrorists at all. Revoking human rights from any group of humans is inherently absurd, but because Muslims have been so dehumanized in the eyes of India’s religious right, the supporters of Gujarat ka Lalla are unable to see how absurd this statement is.



In this passage, the fact that a baby appears out of nowhere next to a group called “Mothers of the Disappeared” is a strangely hopeful omen. It is as if, in spite of the violence and oppression that takes children away from their mothers, the force of life in the face of these things is so strong that it is able to continue in the form of new babies and new generations. Additionally, the fact that Anjum suffers discrimination at an event that is supposed to be a protest against various forms of oppression implies that she is so marginalized from society that she is not deemed worthy of protection even here.



Her main opponent is a former bureaucrat and aspiring politician, Mr. Aggarwal, who aims to establish himself as a leader by settling the conflict between Anjum and the Mothers of the Disappeared. Anjum insults the man heavily, but before the conflict can escalate, Saddam and Ishrat intervene. Ishrat “wade[s] into the battlefield, intervening in the practiced way that only Hijras [know] how to when it [comes] to protecting each other—by making a declaration of war and peace at the same time.” She begins to sing a classic song from a popular film and to dance, using “her outrageous, aggressive sexuality” to embarrass the bureaucrat. But someone tries to push her, and a fight breaks out. The police arrive on the scene, and Anjum and Ustad Hameed are arrested. The next morning, they are released on no charges, but the baby is gone.

This is another moment in the story where the feminine is cast as more powerful than the masculine. Mr. Aggarwal is helpless before Ishrat’s fierce expression of her sexuality. In making a “declaration of war and peace at the same time,” Ishrat makes it impossible for Mr. Aggarwal to fight back. Additionally, the blunt way that Roy describes Anjum and Ustad Hameed’s arrest goes to show how vulnerable the population is to police brutality, as Anjum and Ustad Hameed spend a night in jail for no legal reason.



CHAPTER 4

Dr. Azad Bhartiya is the last person to see the baby before she disappears. He has been on a hunger strike for 12 years, and is so thin he is “almost two-dimensional.” In explanation of his protest, he wears a grimy sign around his neck, on which is written his full name, home address, and current address—the Jantar Mantar, where he sits every day in protest. It also lists his qualifications, of which there are many: two master’s degrees, a bachelor’s in history, and a pending PhD. The doctor is also the “founder member” of the World People’s Forum and the Indian Socialist Democratic Party. Finally, below is a long list of the many things the Azad Bhartiya is protesting: “US Capitalism, Indian and American State Terrorism,” along with nuclear weapons, bad education, corruption, violence, environmental degradation, unemployment, and, in his words “all other evils.”

Through his dedication to sitting every day at the Jantar Mantar for over 12 years, Dr. Azad Bhartiya is a symbol of hope and resilience in the novel. His commitment to his cause is so strong that he has starved himself to the edge of death. The plethora of causes that the doctor advocates for—including everything from the end of imperialism to the end of unemployment—may seem absurd, and even a sign that he is a little bit mad. However, when readers think about all of the issues that have been presented in the novel so far, it is clear that the people of India do desperately need to see the end of all of these things if they are to live safe and happy lives.



Next to Dr. Azad Bhartiya is a small bag from a shopping mall, that contains several typed pages in English and Hindi. The doctor has placed several copies of the document in front of him, held down by rocks, for sale—it is called “My News & Views (Update).” On it, he introduces himself by explain that Azad Bhartiya is not his given name, it means “Free/Liberated Indian,” and he has chosen it for himself. He explains that a “free Indian” shouldn’t be found starving himself to death on the street, anticipating that readers might expect that to find a truly liberated Indian “in a modern house with a car and a computer.” But he explains that he is not in a modern house with a car and computer and rather is on the street because, simply put, he is a revolutionary. It is his 12th year on hunger strike—he eats one light meal every 48 hours or so to survive. In his words, he “eat[s] only to live and [he lives] only to struggle.”

Here, Azad Bhartiya’s interpretation of freedom goes directly against what capitalism would have Indians believe freedom looks like. Bhartiya astutely assumes that the readers of his “News & Views” associate freedom with material comfort. But for Bhartiya, freedom means the ability to do what he thinks is necessary in the world, irrespective of the expectations society might place on someone who, as he seems to, comes from a relatively privileged background (he speaks English and has two master’s degrees). Like Anjum, Azad Bhartiya has located his freedom on the margins of society, rather than within its constructs of success and liberty.



Dr. Azad Bhartiya confesses that he is not technically a doctor, as his PhD is pending. But he chooses to refer to himself with the title anyway, mostly to make people listen to him. He justifies this choice, writing, “If there were no urgency in our political situation, I would not do this because, technically speaking, it is dishonest. But sometimes, in politics, one has to cut poison with poison.”

For all 12 years of his hunger strike, Dr. Azad Bhartiya has been at Jantar Mantar, the place of protest. While he sees so many groups come and go, hopeful that finally, someone will hear them and listen to their message, the PhD hopeful is a little bit more jaded. He writes, simply, “No one listens. The police beats them, the government ignores them.” Unfortunately, most protesters, unlike him, lack the resources to go on an indefinite strike: they are poor, and have to go pay their landlords or moneylenders.

Seemingly out of nowhere, Dr. Azad Bhartiya changes the line of discourse with the rhetorical question, “What caste am I? That is your question?” The doctor states quite clearly that for him, caste doesn’t matter: he rhetorically asks his readers what castes figures such as Jesus and the Prophet Muhammed were. He has disavowed Hinduism exactly because he doesn’t believe in the caste system, as he is an advocate for the poor. Indeed, he writes, even if he were President of America—“that world-class Brahmin”—he would be on hunger strike for the poor.

Dr. Azad Bhartiya believes he is on 24-hour surveillance by the government on account of his radical politics. A staunch anti-capitalist, he believes “capitalism is like poisoned honey. People swarm to it like bees. I don’t go.” According to him, the hyper-capitalist government of India feels threatened by these politics. He has been hit by multiple cars during his hunger strike, which he believes to have been sent by politicians and businessmen whose work he protests. After being hit by a car, he broke his arm and still wears a cast. While his life as a hunger-striker is difficult, the PhD candidate has built something of a community with the other activists, many of whom have signed his cast. He concludes his letter with the declaration that all of the information written above is “true to the best of [his] knowledge and no material has been concealed therefrom.”

Up until this point, Dr. Bhartiya seems to have the most integrity of all of the activists that the novel has examined. But even he, who so earnestly believes in his cause that he has been on hunger strike for 12 years, feels the need to lie to get ahead. This demonstrates the extent to which India’s political game has become totally immersed in corruption. The novel suggests that even the most innocent-seeming political players participate in misleading their audiences.



In this moment, Bhartiya acknowledges the ways in which his class privilege allows him to continue protesting—he is not in debt, unlike many of the poor, and so has the luxury not to work. Even though he says he believes no one listens to the protestors, it is clear that there is a part of him that believes it is possible for voices of dissent to be heard—otherwise, he himself would not have dedicated his life to this cause.



Dr. Bhartiya’s critique of the caste-system subtly shows his readers another path to freedom: ignoring the societal roles their caste has carved out for them. By saying that he would protest for the poor even if he were a “world-class Brahmin,” Bhartiya states that he would do away with the privileges of high-caste identity in order to do the work he feels is important. This itself is a kind of freedom. It highlights the fact that Bhartiya is there because he wants to be, not because he has to be, which in turn demonstrates his strength of character.



In this passage, the various forms of attack Dr. Bhartiya claims to have experienced speak to the Indian government’s corruption. He is exercising his right to free speech by undergoing this hunger strike, and, as he supposedly lives under a democracy, this shouldn’t endanger his life. However, according to Bhartiya, he lives in a country that is more committed to upholding the principles of capitalism than it is to protecting the rights of its people. That the other activists at Jantar Mantar sign Dr. Bhartiya’s cast demonstrates their commitment to community resilience, to celebrating one another in spite of the violence they face.



Dr. Azad Bhartiya has seen the baby disappear, and, in the moment that he saw this, he believes the baby “had three mothers on the pavement that night, all three stitched together by threads of light.” Because the police rely on him for information about the goings-on at Jantar Mantar, they question him about the disappearance of the baby, “[slapping] him around a little—not seriously, just from habit.” They confiscate his *News & Views* and other documents when the doctor refuses to give them any information, and beat him again. Still, when they go, the determined activist immediately sets about the “laborious process of documentation from scratch.”

The police have no suspects for the kidnapping of the baby, but, nonetheless, they set up a public announcement about her disappearance and register a kidnapping case—but without much hope of the investigation going anywhere. They “[have] already registered one thousand one hundred and forty-six similar cases in the city that year. And it [is] only May.”

CHAPTER 5

Saddam Hussain and Ishrat are on a horseback “slow-geese chase” through the city. Anjum has sent them to follow an auto-rickshaw, and, on this journey, the two pass through parts of Delhi they have never seen before. Ishrat is surprised to see that the people in these neighborhoods “even have gardens for their cars.” Then, once they pass over the flyover, they enter a part of the city “less sure of itself.” There are hospitals “so full of sickness” that their patients spill onto the streets, where they play “Indian roulette”—buying bootleg versions of the medications they need from street vendors, with a “60:40 chance” that the drugs are “genuine.”

Finally, the rickshaw leads Ishrat and Saddam to a residential neighborhood. A young woman gets out of the rickshaw, enters an apartment building, and turns on the light when she arrives in her apartment. She recognizes Saddam and Ishrat from Jantar Mantar, and makes eye contact with Saddam, who waves back. He leaves his contact card at Jannat Guest House and Funeral Services in her mailbox, labelled S. Tilotamma.

The mention that the police slap Dr. Bhartiya around “just from habit” is further evidence of how practices of brutality and disrespect of the populace are ingrained in the police culture. In dedicating himself to rewriting his entire document once the police have left, Dr. Bhartiya demonstrates an extraordinary commitment to his work, which, although small in its scope, is a rare example of honest, if radical, political activism in the midst of a political landscape riddled with corruption.



Here, the fact that the police don't really expect the investigation to go anywhere goes to show that the law in India really doesn't have the power to truly protect its most vulnerable citizens—such as an abandoned, low-caste baby.



Through describing Ishrat and Saddam's journey through the city, Roy exposes readers to the extreme class inequality in which Delhi's citizen's live. Ishrat's surprise that people have “gardens for their cars”—driveways—suggests that she thinks having such a large amount of space is excessive. The wealthy neighborhoods' luxury juxtaposes greatly with the public hospitals Roy describes, which don't even have enough space for all of their patients—let alone “gardens” for cars. The fact that patients need to buy unofficial versions of the medication they need demonstrates their clear lack of financial privilege.



Here, readers learn the woman Saddam and Ishrat have followed home, who has kidnapped the baby, is Tilo. Because she has kidnapped the baby rather than giving it to the police, readers can assume that Tilo, like the people at Jannat Guest House, has a distrust for authority and likes to play by her own rules.



CHAPTER 6

When the “Baby Seal” grows older, will she remember the truth about her infancy? Her childhood? Would she get a whiff of “ripe Mahua” and remember the forest where she was born? Would she remember the texture of the “dry leaves on the forest floor, or the hot-metal touch of the barrel of her mother’s gun that had been held to her forehead with the safety catch off?” Or is she destined never to know, nor remember, anything about her past?

The questions raised in this paragraph seek to address not only whether the baby herself will remember her own history, but whether India on a whole will remember the histories of brutality, oppression, and violence that continue to influence its politics today.



CHAPTER 7

Another day in Delhi, and the city is shaken by simultaneous explosions that have gone off in bus stop, a café, and a shopping mall. Five are dead and several are injured. The television newscasters are in shock, but the first-person narrator isn’t: “blasts evoke a range of emotions in [him], but sadly, shock is no longer one of them.” The narrator finds himself in an old apartment in a nice neighborhood. He owns the apartment, but his tenant is nowhere to be found. He has been sent home from the foreign service because his drinking habit has worsened, and he is supposed to check into rehab to deal with his health before returning to Kabul, where he is stationed. Although the situation there is dangerous—his office has been attacked twice—the narrator longs to return. He is addicted to Kabul’s “battle of wits.”

The new, first-person narrator shows himself to be a jaded bureaucrat, desensitized to the atrocities of the wars that occur in the region of the world where he lives. That he would long to return to Kabul because he is addicted to its “battle of wits” is a harrowing admission. As a functionary of the government, the narrator should be seeking in all ways possible to reduce the violence that occurs in the city where he is stationed. However, his cold appreciation for the violence demonstrates not only how numb he and the Indian government have become to violence, but also how perhaps they might not be working towards reducing violence at all.



While he waits to be declared fit for service, and avoids the rehab he is supposed to be doing, the narrator has decided to check in on his tenants. The neighborhood where the apartment is situated was, when he bought it, up-and-coming, but since then the area has become over-built, full of middle-class families and constantly under construction. The apartments are glossier and more expensive looking, and the streets are full of upper-caste Indians and white expats alike. There’s even a new elementary school, where children are taught English nursery rhymes from a young age. The narrator observes that, in spite of the construction and the smell of waste, “compared to Kabul or anywhere else in Afghanistan or Pakistan [...] this foggy little back lane [...] is like a small corner of Paradise.”

The narrator’s use of the word “Paradise” in this passage invites readers to compare this neighborhood with Anjum’s “paradise”—Jannat Guest House and Funeral Services. According to this narrator, “paradise” looks like the increasing influence of Western cultures in India (as evidenced by the expats and the English instruction in the nursery school), as well as the dominance of upper-caste Indians without any lower-caste people in sight. This is essentially the opposite of Anjum’s “paradise,” which includes almost exclusively people who lack class privilege and is entirely disassociated from the influence of Western culture.



Having seen his fair share of suffering during the foreign service, posted in various neighboring countries, the narrator thinks highly of India. He even scorns the “grumbling intellectuals and professional dissenters” who complain about the country, observing that they “can only [complain] because they are allowed to. And they are allowed to because, for all [India’s] imperfections, [it is] a genuine democracy.” This is why the narrator is proud to serve the country’s government.

The narrator clearly thinks poorly of those who criticize India’s government. His disrespect towards these critics demonstrates his unwillingness to recognize India’s flaws which, the novel argues, are many. Because he is a functionary of the government, this attitude might be indicative of the entire government’s general disregard for constructive criticism, and lack of interest in listening to its people. What the narrator doesn’t seem to realize is that under “genuine democracy,” not only are people “allowed” to complain, but they are listened to and responded to by the governing bodies.



When the narrator discovers that the apartment he rents out on the second floor of the building is empty, he goes downstairs and his first-floor tenant’s wife invites him to have some tea. He observes, with some dismay, the tacky interior decorating to which she has subjected his property: watermelon pink painting on the walls, cheap wood furniture. As the two sit down to have tea, the woman’s maid—who the narrator imagines to be an indigenous woman from a poor region of the country—crawls beneath their feet to clean the floor. The narrator thinks of how his father, who has “reflexive hostility towards Christian missionaries and their flock, would have called [the maid] Hallelujah.”

The image of the maid literally crawling beneath the feet of her boss and the narrator demonstrates the extremity of social inequality in India. His immediate recognition that the maid is probably indigenous, and from a poor region of the country, indicates how rigid the social structures are—he would never expect to see a light-skinned Brahmin maid, for instance. What’s more, his thought about his father’s “distaste” for Christianity reflects a legacy of religious intolerance and Hindu supremacy.



As they drink tea, the woman explains to the narrator what has happened with her upstairs neighbor, who seems to have left quite suddenly. She shares a vague story involving a baby and the police. The narrator remembers his tenant—although tenant is “something of a euphemism,” as he has romantic feelings for the tenant. In spite of the fact that the narrator admits to loving her, the two never have had any sort of romantic relationship.

Here, the narrator’s character becomes more complex. Whereas up until this point, he has seemed to be a dry and almost heartless bureaucrat, in this moment readers recognize a more emotional, sensitive side to the narrator. His feelings for the tenant, who from what he has described so far does not subscribe to the norms or values of mainstream society, suggests that the narrator himself may not fully subscribe to these beliefs either.



The narrator first meets his tenant in 1984, when Indira Gandhi is assassinated by her Sikh bodyguard—spurring mob lynching of Sikhs all across the country. The narrator remembers that he even saw a lynching, which, like the explosions, failed to shock him at the time—he observes that “normality, in [his] part of the world, is a bit like a boiled egg: its humdrum surface conceals at its heart a yolk of egregious violence.” At the moment of such political unrest, the narrator and his tenant are involved in the production of a play called *Norman, Is That You?* but decide to postpone the opening day due to the political moment.

The revelation that there were lynchings of Sikhs after Indira Gandhi’s assassination gives readers more historical context for the violence against Muslims that is occurring in the novel’s present. It is clear that Muslims are not the only group to have been historically persecuted by the Hindu majority. The narrator’s belief that violence exists at the heart of India’s culture is a defeatist, pessimistic outlook, that stands in stark contrast to the other characters, such as Anjum, who exhibit strength of character, resilience, and hope.



The play is directed by David Quartermaine, a gay Englishman who has moved to Delhi from Leeds whom the narrator admires. In the play, Naga, one of the narrator's classmates, plays Norman, while the narrator plays Norman's lover, Garson Hobart. Both he and Naga study history at Delhi university, and they grew up together. Tilo, short for Tilotamma, is the set and lighting staff member of the play, and she is a student of architecture. The narrator is instantly infatuated with her, although she "[doesn't] look like any of the pale, well-groomed girls [he knows] at college. Her complexion [is] what the French would call *café au lait* (with very little *lait*).” Unlike other girls her age, Tilo doesn't care about her appearance. Indeed, her “complete absence of a desire to please, or to put someone at their ease, could, in a less vulnerable person, have been construed as arrogance.”

At first, the narrator can't place where Tilo is from, but due to her accented English, he guesses Kerala. He learns that her father is not in the picture, and her mother, originally from a high-caste Syrian-Christian family in Kerala, got pregnant as a teenager and gave Tilo up for adoption, only to adopt her own baby herself. Tilo isn't close to her family, and never goes home for the holidays. Both Naga and the narrator try to charm Tilo, but she only has eyes for a third member of their play—Musa Yeswi.

Musa, like Tilo, studies architecture, and while the two are very close the narrator can't tell if they seem more like siblings or lovers. Musa is a quiet Kashmiri young man very dissimilar to Naga, who adores attention and seems able to change not only his personality, but his very appearance, to please those in whose company he finds himself. Musa, on the other hand, seems to want to draw attention away from himself, but has a quiet sort of strength. He is gentle and serene, and his pale Kashmiri complexion starkly contrasts with Tilo's dark skin.

In this passage, the narrator's description of Tilo reveals a lot about the way he views class, belonging, and privilege. The first thing he says about her is that her skin is dark, which due to colorism in India is associated with members of the low-caste and generally not considered to be a sign of beauty. Furthermore, his admission that most of the girls he knows in college are “pale” and “well-groomed” reveals that at the time, college was a place that was accessible principally to members of the elite. Unlike the narrator, Tilo isn't invested in the nuances of privilege and class, not caring to disguise her apparently humble background.



Tilo's complicated life story—being born into a high-caste family, given up for adoption, and then being adopted back into the same family under the pretense of being an adopted child rather than a birth child—makes it impossible for her to claim the caste privilege that she would have had access to if her mother had accepted her as a birth daughter. However, because her mother's family wanted to save face, and not admit that their daughter had given birth to such a dark-skinned baby out of wedlock, Tilo is forced to live in a caste-obsessed society without being able to claim any as her own. This renders her a definitive outsider.



Naga's shape-shifting personality in a way speaks to his lack of character—he doesn't have a true sense of self or core values that come through no matter where he is. Naga cares more about external validation than he does about sincerity. Musa, on the other hand, seems to have strong values, a quiet strength emanating from a deep knowing of and commitment to himself that Naga seems to lack. This demonstrates that Musa is likely more willing to stick up for what he believes, even if this isolates him from others.



Once they graduate from architecture school, Tilo and Musa drift apart. Musa returns to Kashmir, Tilo begins to work in an architecture firm. But Tilo and the narrator see each other occasionally, and one day, after visiting the shrine of a famous poet, the narrator goes to her house for the first time. The two smoke hashish, and although the narrator wants to tell her about his feelings for her, he doesn't. Instead, he asks if she plans to marry Musa, which she answers by saying she won't marry anybody at all. That night, the narrator, who at the time still lives in his parents' house, marvels at how different his own life is from Tilo's. While he is a comfortable member of the upper-middle-class, surrounded by attentive family, she is all alone, poor, seemingly without the foundations that are so imperative in the narrator's own life.

While away, Musa has become involved in the Kashmiri *résistance*. Tilo, seemingly having moved on from her romance with him entirely, marries Naga weeks after Musa's death. But the narrator continues to love her unrequitedly. After all, his Brahmin family "would never accept her—the girl without a past, without a caste—into the family." Indeed, the narrator has chosen a much more acceptable path for himself. He's married a Brahmin woman, with whom he has two daughters. One of them hopes to become a human rights lawyer, which the narrator initially thinks is merely "teenage rebellion against her father," but later he comes to recognize that human rights law can be respectable and "even lucrative." The narrator has never imagined doing anything that would upset his family's comfortable lifestyle, and yet, when Tilo reenters his life, asking to rent a room in his apartment building, he puts his family at risk.

The Naga that Tilo has married is very different from the teenage boy she once knew. He has gone from an idealistic, overly intellectual, radically left student to an "unemployable intellectual" to a mainstream journalist. Along the way, Naga has advocated for a great number of leftist causes, most of which have nothing to do with each other. Indeed, the narrator observes, "what has remained consistent [in Naga's political opinion] is only the decibel level." In the narrator's eyes, Naga has a "handler" in the government, and, as a well-respected journalist in the field, he is a "valuable asset" for the Intelligence Bureau. Naga writes articles that help to settle down human rights groups when they're upset, when, as the narrator puts it, their facts "need[] correcting." Because Naga is the first to get breaking news from the government, he quickly rises to even greater success in his field.

The narrator's failure to tell Tilo how he feels about her reveals his cowardly nature. Readers can assume that the narrator's hesitance to be vulnerable with Tilo stems not only from the fact that vulnerability is hard for everybody, but also from the great class differences that exist between the narrator and Tilo. The narrator struggles to admit his feelings for her because, due to his class background, he is not "supposed" to date someone like Tilo. However, it seems that this difference is precisely what makes the narrator so attracted to Tilo: she represents a world totally different from his own and has access to a freedom that he doesn't have.



In this passage, the narrator explicitly mentions his family's disapproval as a reason that he chose not to pursue Tilo, even though he loves her. In this way, the narrator's dedication to maintaining India's rigid class structure prevents him from developing the types of relationships that he would ideally like to have. What's more, the narrator's disapproval of his daughter's desire to pursue human rights as a profession reveals the ways in which his work at the government has desensitized him to the necessity of human rights. For him, the only saving grace of the profession is not that it will save lives, but that it will make his daughter money. For the narrator, the values of capitalism are more important than the values of human rights.



In this moment, readers recognize how Naga's people-pleasing nature as an adolescent has blossomed into a typical form of corruption in his adulthood. More interested in recognition in his field of journalism than actually telling the truth, Naga turns a blind eye to human rights abuses the government commits in order to maintain a relationship with officials that guarantees him breaking news stories. The narrator's view that some facts about human rights need correcting demonstrates that he does not value journalism's power to tell the truth; rather, he sees the media as a force to be controlled so that it is in the government's best interests. Contrary to what he has said previously, the India this narrator lives in and helps to run is not a democracy at all.



The narrator remembers how Naga, as a youth, always had a fiery talent for rhetoric. He recalls how, in elementary school, Naga made a powerful speech about the futility of religion, for instance, and observes that in the current political climate—"as the **saffron** tide of Hindu Nationalism rises in our country like the swastika once did in another"—Naga would have been expelled, or worse, for making such a speech. Indeed, even the narrator's colleagues in the government are ultra-conservative, what he calls "closet Brahmins" who hide their deep investment in the caste system from the public eye. The narrator himself is a twice-born Brahmin, which is why he is accepted among his colleagues. In spite of his own conservative leanings and complicity in the oppressive government, it saddens the narrator to see Naga so "housebroken."

When the narrator is stationed in Kashmir, Naga is working as a journalist in the region. As the Kashmir conflict is an area of government work of which human rights activists are heavily critical, Naga's role there proves exceptionally useful to the narrator and his team—although Naga still sees himself as an honest, left-leaning journalist. The narrator himself observes the violence in Kashmir as exaggerated, but, principally, he blames the various factions of Islam in the region for annihilating one another. Indeed, he observes that it is to the Indian government's advantage that there are "eight or nine versions of the 'True' Islam battling it out in Kashmir." Some of the most radical, he admits, are actually funded by the government. And Kashmiri businessmen help out by investing in the Peace Process—which, the narrator is quick to observe, is "an entirely different business opportunity from peace itself."

One fall day, the narrator is working with the Governor of Kashmir, and has just finished listening to His Excellency's morning briefing when he receives a strange phone call from the Joint Interrogation Center, which operated out of the Shiraz Cinema. The narrator shares that it wasn't the government that shut down the Cinema, rather, Jihadist extremists who had done so years before, arguing that cinema was simply a vehicle for Hindu propaganda. The call comes from Major Amrik Singh, who, contrary to custom, addresses the narrator by his name—Biplab Dasgupta. Hearing from the Major distresses the narrator, who has been dealing with the troubles that the unhinged Major has caused in the region with unnecessary and indiscreet murders. (The Major does indeed prove to be an unstable character—years after his time in Kashmir, he murders his wife and three children while on asylum in the United States.)

In this passage, the narrator's disappointment that Naga has been "housebroken" shows readers that in spite of his corruption and cold heart, there is something in the narrator that values resistance, difference, and truth. The detail about how all of his colleagues in the government are "closet Brahmins" is evidence that in spite of democracy's arrival in the country, the rigid caste systems in India haven't changed to reflect democratic values, or the equality of the people. The narrator's casual tone in comparing the rise of Hindu nationalism to the rise of Nazism in Germany is alarming in its coldness; he seems wholly unperturbed that he is complicit in the development of such a violent movement.



Here, the narrator's admission that the Indian government funds Muslim factions in Kashmir to perpetuate the conflict in the region reveals an extreme level of corruption. The Indian government is fighting so that Kashmir will remain part of the country, and, as such, should ideally seek to protect the citizens of the region. However, because the government recognizes that instability in the region is economically profitable, it actively endangers the lives of Kashmiris by pitting them against one another. The detail about the peace process being "entirely different" from peace itself makes the government's dishonesty very clear. The officials, and the corrupt Kashmiri businessmen who help them, intend to draw out the conflict for as long as it is profitable.



Roy includes the detail that Jihadists shut down the cinema in order to demonstrate that religious extremism prevails and is a problem on both sides of the conflict. Additionally, Major Amrik Singh's characterization as an extremely violent, and unstable, man serves to negatively characterize the Indian Army in which he serves. That he would be able to get away with indiscreetly and unnecessarily murdering citizens reveals that the government does not care about Kashmiris' lives. They even protect Major Amrik Singh from experiencing any sort of consequence for his actions. The correlation between the major's violence in his army position and his domestic violence invites readers to consider that, although the first type of violence is technically legal and the other is illegal, they might in fact be equally morally wrong.



Major Amrik has big news for Biplab—he has captured an “A-Category terrorist,” Commander Gulrez. Biplab, for his turn, is not impressed. Because the military is incentivized to capture, torture, and kill “A-category” terrorists, it seems that every Kashmiri captured is a dreaded member of Jihadist movements. But, more interestingly to Biplab, the major reveals that he has also captured a “ladies,” who isn’t Kashmiri. This is unusual. The captured woman has been handed over to ACP Pinky, the only female in the military force and yet one of its most brutal interrogators. But the captee has announced that she has an important message for Biplab, which she has sent via Major Amrik: “G-A-R-S-O-N H-O-B-A-R-T.”

Biplab realizes instantly that the woman who has been captured is Tilo, which leads him to wonder if Commander Gulrez—the “A-category” terrorist that Major Amrik Singh has captured—is, in fact, Musa. Biplab immediately wants to get Tilo out of capture, but instinctually he wishes to distance himself from the woman he loves. So he calls up Naga and asks him to go and take Tilo away from the interrogation center, and orders for Tilo’s immediate release.

Once Naga has brought Tilo to his hotel, Biplab requests that he put Tilo on the next plane to Delhi. Naga replies, “She’s not freight, Das-Goose,” referring to Biplab’s college nickname, Das-Goose-da, which Naga would pronounce in a German accent. Biplab reflects on his name, admitting that he has never forgiven his parents for naming him Biplab—revolution. He has considered changing his name to something “more peaceful like Siddhartha or Gautam,” but has decided not to. Rather, he continues existing as Biplab, a revolution, “in the innermost chamber of the secret heart of the establishment that calls itself the Government of India.”

While Tilo is recovering from her time in the interrogation center, the situation in Kashmir continues to worsen. The body count rises, and Biplab is advised not to go back to the city from the Governor’s house that day. Even from the Governor’s house deep within the forest, Biplab can hear the cries of Kashmiris protesting the deaths of their compatriots. “Azadi! Azadi! Azadi!” they cry. While Biplab understands that the word in their dialect loosely means freedom, he finds irony in the fact that no Kashmiri defines the word exactly the same way, or associates it with the same “ideological and geographic contours.” But, he believes, the Kashmiris are not confused—quite the opposite. Rather, they operate with “a terrible clarity that exists outside the language of modern geopolitics. All the protagonists on all sides of the conflict, especially [the government exploit] this fault line mercilessly.”

Biplab’s failure to be impressed by the Major’s declaration that he has captured an “A-category terrorist” reveals the army’s dishonesty in the Kashmir conflict. Indeed, the army lies about having captured terrorists when they have instead captured, tortured, or killed innocent civilians. That they are incentivized to do so reveals that the Indian government values the appearance of military success over truly winning. This lack of integrity makes them willing to endanger the lives of the very people they are supposed to protect.



The extraordinarily close relationship between Naga and Biplab stinks of corruption. That a journalist would be so available to do a government employee’s bidding should, ideally, call into question the integrity of that journalist. Naga’s close involvement in government dealings seems to be obviously corrupt to everyone but him.



In this moment, the plays on Biplab’s name are noteworthy. Naga’s pronunciation of Dasgupta in a German accent may—even if Naga himself is unaware of it—be a reference to Nazi Germany on Roy’s part. Secondly, Biplab’s distaste for his name, which means “revolution,” reveals his conservative nature. It also speaks to how the hopes and dreams that India had immediately after independence—a corruption-free, liberated state—have come to die, and have been replaced by complicity in a conservative, oppressive establishment.



In this moment, Biplab’s observation that Kashmiris’ definition of Azadi exists outside of “the contours of modern geopolitics” suggests that the systems and ideologies of modern geopolitics do not create the possibility of simple freedom. Kashmiris want liberty, and Biplab’s suggestion is that they won’t find it within any ideology or practice that already exists. Due to the corrupt political climate, the “protagonists” or leaders of various political bodies are able to exploit the Kashmiris’ raw, simple desire for freedom to further their own agendas—often, agendas that have nothing to do with freedom at all.



The protestors outside the forest house where Biplab is sheltered are, in fact, at public funerals. For Kashmiris, those who die in conflict with or at the hands of the Indian government are martyrs for the cause of independence. On occasions like this, the crowds get riled up, and the police must remain vigilant, but “out of sight.” The Indian government operates under the assumption that allowing the people to take to the streets to mourn their dead gives them an opportunity to channel their frustration at the government, so it doesn’t turn into “an unmanageable cliff of rage.” That’s why, in all of the years of the Kashmiri conflicts, the police have allowed the Kashmiri people to “mourn[], [weep], and shout[] their slogans”—and, soon after that, to go back home.

The next day, once things have settled, Biplab drives to Naga’s hotel to meet him and Tilo, only to discover that the two of them have already left. A few weeks later, he receives an invitation to their wedding. He feels responsible for the marriage, which he deems to be ill-fated—he knows that Tilo would never willingly marry a journalist whom she knows to be corrupt. And yet again, Biplab chooses not to tell her how he feels, and attends the wedding as a guest. There, Tilo wears no makeup, and is even almost bald. She looks nothing like a traditional bride. Meanwhile, Naga’s family, who, like Biplab’s, are high-caste and wealthy, clearly disapprove of Naga’s choice of bride. Naga’s young niece even asks her grandmother innocently if Tilo is a “nigger,” to which Naga’s mother replies, “We don’t use words like *nigger* anymore [...] We say *negro*.”

This is the last time Biplab sees Tilo until, four years before the present moment, she sees his name in the paper under an advertisement for a tenant in a second-floor apartment. She says she needs space to work as a freelance illustrator, and soon moves in. At the time, Biplab is on placement with the Ministry of Defense, and is at home alone. When Tilo moves into the apartment upstairs, Biplab is excited.

In the present moment, in Tilo’s abandoned apartment, Biplab senses, from looking at all of the Post-Its, documents, and the photographs in the place, that there is something dangerous about the life she has been leading. Among the photographs is one of a dead child, four or five years old, wrapped in a shroud. The wound on the child’s temple has bled onto the white shroud, leaving a “rose-shaped stain.” Biplab wonders immediately if the child is Musa’s daughter. The other is a picture of a Kashmiri man holding a pair of kittens. Biplab opens a green file and begins to look at the documents it contains. Here, even more mysteriously, Tilo has pictures of a public toilet. But these photos have an explanation.

The way that the army addresses the issue of Kashmiri funerals is highly manipulative. Kashmiri people seem to see their vocal participation in mourning their dead as an expression of freedom, even an act of resistance. But they don’t know that even their resistance is predicted, controlled, and monitored by the government. What they perceive as freedom of expression in the face of violence doesn’t stem from the army recognizing their right to mourn their dead. Rather, the army allows this small expression of freedom so they can maintain control of the region.



Here, Tilo’s failure to conform to traditional beauty standards causes Naga’s family to disapprove of her. Her expression of feminine gender in a way that does not conform to the upper-caste expectations Naga’s family places on her renders her an outsider even at her own wedding. What’s more, the fact that a young member of Naga’s family—not an older, out-of-touch person, as might be expected—would use the n-word demonstrates how deeply conservative and discriminatory Naga’s family is. Naga’s mother’s correction instead only further emphasizes this point, as she suggests another antiquated and racist term.



In spite of having seen Tilo many times in contexts that totally defy upper-caste expectations of femininity, Biplab continues to be enamored of her. This reveals the fact that he does not wholly adhere to the values of his upper-caste background.



Biplab’s attraction to Tilo is so strong that he is willing to remain in her apartment and look through her things, even though he suspects that something dangerous is occurring there. It is through his attraction to Tilo that Biplab begins to consider and engage with perspectives other than his own or than that of the government. The documents that Tilo has chosen to keep hint at her interest in the Kashmir conflict, her preoccupation with the violence that occurs in the region.



In a document titled “Ghafoor’s Story,” a first-person narrator has written down the story of what happened in that public toilet. Biplab reads that outside that particular public toilet, the narrator and a friend are walking when they hear Special Task Force vehicles pull up on the road. The soldiers force the narrator and his friend to cross the street at gunpoint, telling them that “an Afghan terrorist [has escaped and has run] into the toilet.”

The soldiers ask the narrator and his friend to go in and ask the terrorist to surrender, and, fearing for their lives, the two try to resist, only to have the Special Task Force soldiers put pistols to their heads. The narrator’s friend tells him to cooperate with the soldiers, who he says are just trying to make a scene. Eventually they enter, and find a man in the drain, whom they realize is Kashmiri and not Afghan. They ask him to come out, but he seems to be unable to speak or move. After some time, they watch the man die in front of them, covered in human waste.

Once the man has died, the soldiers give the narrator and his friends crowbars and spades to dig the dead body out of the manhole. It is then that the narrator discovers what had happened—the soldiers had tied up the man and put him in the manhole earlier, after he had been badly tortured. The Special Task Forces officers ask the two to sign a paper that reads that the STF has “tracked down and killed a dreaded Afghan terrorist who was cornered in a public toilet in Nawab Bazaar.” But the truth, according to the narrator, is that the dead man was simply a laborer from Bandipora. Filled with regret, the narrator recalls the eyes of the Kashmiri in the manhole, thinking that they were “forgiving eyes, understanding eyes.”

Unconvinced by the story, Biplab judges it terrible. He feels strongly that Kashmiris are always exaggerating the wrongs done to them, the things they suffer. After all, he thinks, Kashmiri militants have done their fair share of horrible things to Indian soldiers. “If one has to choose,” he thinks, “then give me a Hindu fundamentalist any day over a Muslim one.” He remembers the Pakistani Army’s action in East Pakistan as a “clear case of genocide,” and refers to the Indian Army as the great liberator of Bangladesh.

The soldiers in this moment are comfortable accosting two innocent civilians, demonstrating that they are more concerned with exercising power over the people than they are with protecting or even respecting them. Two civilians should have nothing to do with an Afghan terrorist, but because the soldiers want to demonstrate their power, they accost the civilians.



Here, the fact that the soldiers have characterized a Kashmiri citizen as an “Afghan” is a tactic they use to justify their cruelty. Because the Indian Army shouldn’t, of course, kill or torture Indian citizens, the soldiers need to pretend that their victim is an Afghan in order to be able to abuse him. To uphold the myth of nationalism, in a way, soldiers create narratives that associate members of other nationalities with violence, and Indians with innocence.



Even though the man has been tortured and left to die in a manhole, he manages to have compassion for the two civilians that could have helped him but didn’t. That he is able to have compassion for them shows how commonplace the Indian Army’s cruelty and abuse has become in Kashmir at the time. It is not clear why the soldiers have chosen to torture this particular man, but it does seem to have been unnecessary. A laborer has nothing to do with the Kashmir conflict, and yet the soldiers, eager for recognition and reward, force the onlookers to blatantly lie on record, demonstrating their corruption.



Biplab’s reaction to this story shows how history is always told from the victor’s perspective. He is willing to recognize violence that Muslims perpetrate as “genocide” only because he and his people were on the victim side of the conflict. Given what readers already know about the Indian Army and the atrocities it commits in the novel, it is unlikely that all sides view the army as the “great liberator” of Bangladesh; rather, this seems to be more of Biplab’s one-sided thinking.



Drawn to another packet of documents, Biplab picks up two sachets of photos labeled “Otter Pics” and “Otter Kills.” Upon opening them, he realizes to his disappointment that they are not pictures of otters at all—instead, they contain more documentation about Kashmir. They are all pictures of soldiers in the Indian Army, the first featuring a Sikh soldier posing triumphantly over the body of an obviously dead young man. The following pictures are all images of the same soldier in different situations. The soldier’s face is “blank and expressionless.” Biplab finds another document in the same carton that is a resume for a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) in Clovis, California—the city where Major Amrik Singh was granted asylum and murdered his family. Biplab realizes the photos of the soldier are photos of the major. The documents the major used to apply for asylum are also attached.

Before reading the asylum questionnaires, Biplab is so overwhelmed that he pours himself a drink—although he knows, of course, that he shouldn’t. The testimonials provided by Major Amrik Singh and his wife, Loveleen Singh, are startlingly different. The major claims to have been made into a scapegoat by the Indian government for the wrongful murder of a human rights activist, and, because he has been blamed for the incident, the major is in danger of being tortured and killed in India. Loveleen, by contrast, provides a long, detailed narrative about having been captured and tortured by police after her husband, framed for the murder of a Muslim human rights activist, refused to take the blame. Once she is freed, she and her husband are forced to flee Kashmir, but are pursued all throughout India by “Muslim terrorists.”

Biplab doesn’t believe the stories for one second, and, in fact, observes that in Kashmir they “would be received as slapstick comedy.” But the LCSW in charge of determining whether the Singh family qualified for asylum, Ralph Bauer, seems to have believed them. He has diagnosed Loveleen and Major Singh with PTSD, and suggests that they be granted asylum as they are being sought after by terrorists around the world. Biplab wryly thinks to himself that they almost got away with it. He then wonders why Major Singh had committed suicide and murdered his entire family years before, if he had been able to get asylum. He wonders if it really was a suicide, but stops himself—he knows it doesn’t matter to him, the Indian government, or even the California police.

The fact that a soldier would pose victoriously over the dead body of an adolescent shows that for the major, at least, waging war has become more than a job: it’s become something he enjoys. Indeed, the fact that his face seems “blank and expressionless” suggests that he is emotionally unmoved by the dead bodies that he himself has murdered. His lack of empathy reminds readers of Biplab’s own lack of an emotional response to the violence he witnesses as a bureaucrat in the Indian government.



Here, Loveleen Singh in particular takes advantage of the worldwide bias against Muslims to make a case for her to be granted asylum. The stories make no sense within the historical context of India—an army major in the Indian Army would be far too powerful for Muslim Kashmiri resistance members to pursue in such an aggressive way. Even so, Loveleen takes advantage of the fact that post-9/11, an American LCSW might be likely to believe a story in which Muslim terrorists are the antagonists. They make use of the Western ignorance surrounding India’s cultural and political moment.



The narrator coldly observes that Major Singh’s suicide and murder of his entire family doesn’t matter to anyone—not even the government of the state that formerly employed the major, and not the police of the state where the major lived when he died. This reflects Biplab’s cynical view of police and the government. Although it is unjust that Loveleen and her three daughters were murdered, Biplab recognizes that no government would be interested in pursuing justice for them simply because their lives were not important enough to matter.



Biplab, overwhelmed with the bounty of strange documentation he has found in Tilo's apartment, begins to drink heavily and soon falls asleep. He is woken up by a knock at the door. Delirious, he opens the door to two strangers who enter the room: "a young man in dark glasses and an older man. Older woman. Man. Woman-man." The woman introduces herself as Anjum, and says she and her friend Saddam Hussain have come to collect Tilo's things for her. They gather baby toys and clothes from the cupboards, and Anjum asks Biplab if he wants to take a message for Tilo. Without hesitation, he tears a page out of one of her notebooks and writes "GARSON HOBART" on it. Anjum and Saddam leave, and Biplab is left wondering whether it has all been a hallucination.

Now awake, Biplab continues to dig through Tilo's documents. He finds something she's written, a dictionary that appears to be incomplete. It is called "Kashmiri-English Alphabet," and lists the 26 letters of the Roman alphabet, all associated with words commonly used in Kashmir. For instance, A is for Azadi, America, Afghan, Ammunition; F is for funerals; H is for HRV (human rights violations), Half-widows, and Half-orphans; I is for interrogation; N is for NGO and NTR (Nothing To Report); Q is for Quran/Questioning; and Z is for Zulm (oppression). Biplab is reeling. Why, he wonders, is Tilo still "wallowing in this old story?" Especially if Musa isn't around, "filling her head with this trash"?

Biplab's return to drinking reflects his poor mental health and unhappy inner world. The entrance of Anjum and Saddam Hussain on the scene invites readers to compare the different protagonists Roy has provided. Biplab's inability to characterize Anjum's gender reminds readers the extent to which she is othered by mainstream society. In addition, while Anjum and Saddam Hussain seem cheerful, confident and friendly, Biplab himself, drinking alone in an abandoned apartment, is the picture of unhappiness especially compared to the other two.



Tilo's compilation of the Kashmiri-English alphabet is an attempt to create a language for the atrocities that occur in Kashmir. This endeavor harkens back to Anjum's mother's thought, when she discovers that her child is intersex: is it possible to exist outside of language? It seems that Tilo's purpose in documenting the Kashmiri conflict, in going so far as to create an original language for it, is to prove that it exists. From what Biplab has shared with readers about the media coverage in Kashmir, it seems that there is no accurate representation of the true extent of the violence that occurs there. Tilo's project, then, is to create a language for what has never been articulated. This project also has to do with Kulsoom Bi's insistence on the importance of being documented in history: Hijras need this documentation to prove that they exist and have always existed. This acknowledgement empowers the community. In the same way, Tilo's documentation of Kashmir empowers the Kashmiri community by gifting them with the right to tell their own narrative in a language made especially for them.



CHAPTER 8

In the same apartment, some time before, Tilo sits satisfied, observing the sleeping baby that she has kidnapped. In front of her are balloons and a days-old cake, surrounded by ants, on which "Happy Birthday Miss Jebeen" is written in icing. Tilo is happy, for she knows that for her, "the baby [is] the beginning of something." More specifically, the baby is Miss Jebeen returned. "True," Tilo thinks, "the Happy Meadow [has] fallen. But Miss Jebeen [is] come."

The language Tilo uses to describe Miss Jebeen reflects her hope for the future. Although Roy paints a bleak picture of the apartment, with ants crawling over an old birthday cake, it is clear that in spite of the darkness and desolation she finds herself in, Tilo has hope that the future will be better. The baby is the representation of this hope.



When Tilo leaves her marriage with Naga, he is distraught, and asks her what he's done wrong. In Tilo's eyes, Naga is simply an old aristocrat who has inherited the snobby airs of his Brahmin parents. For his part, Naga wonders if the recent death of Tilo's mother has affected her decision to leave him. He is devastated that she is leaving, as he came to love her independence, the fact that she seems to live "in the country of her own skin. A country that issue[s] no visas and seem[s] to have no consulates." Naga admits to himself that he married Tilo principally because he "couldn't reach her," and wonders why she married him—perhaps, he fears, because at the time she needed a cover.

When Naga picks Tilo up from the interrogation center in Kashmir, he is startled by her changed demeanor—she is polite and greets him, which she usually doesn't. The two don't have much time to talk before Ashfaq Mir, a Kashmiri Deputy Commandant in the Indian Army, walks in. Back from dealing with the "protests, firings, killings, [and] funerals" that, in the commandant's words, comprise the "Srinagar Special," Ashfaq has been asked to hand over Tilo himself. In spite of Commandant Mir's almost obsequious politeness, he manages to establish himself as a clear authority in the situation, and Naga senses that something "heinous" has happened "from, if nothing else, the quality of air in the room—it tremble[s]."

Ashfaq Mir orders tea and biscuits. While waiting for these to be served, Naga reads a poster on the wall, on which is written: "We follow our own rules / Ferocious we are / Lethal in any form / Tamer of tides / We play with storms / U guessed it right / We are / Men in Uniform," which Ashfaq jokingly describes as "in-house poetry." In a chatty mood, the commandant shares with his audience how in his college days, he, too, was a Kashmiri separatist but, after losing several family members in the struggle for Azadi, or "freedom," he has come to "see the light." He also thinks aloud, wondering what will happen after Azadi. "What will we do to each other?" He asks rhetorically. Ashfaq believes that if the legendary Azadi is ever achieved, the many different violent sects of Islam in Kashmir will annihilate one another.

Naga and Biplab both, it seems, have been attracted to Tilo in part because her class difference is new and exciting for them. But from the way Tilo describes Naga in this paragraph, it is clear that this admiration has never been reciprocated. Tilo seems scornful of the upper castes, which reflects her complete disregard of the caste system as an authentic way of measuring people's worth. She doesn't care about Naga, so she doesn't stay in the marriage, no matter what class privileges such a union could make available to her.



Tilo's choice to greet Naga startles him, because in her politeness Tilo adopts more traditionally feminine behavior. This suggests that whatever has happened to Tilo in the interrogation center has broken her spirit in some way, weakening her desire for independence. What's more, Ashfaq Mir's eerily upbeat and dismissive attitude about the "Srinagar Special" demonstrates that he, like Major Amrik Singh, has almost completely divorced himself emotionally from his service in the army. He is no longer affected by the death and cruelty that permeates the region.



The first line of the "in-house" poem on the wall indicates the extent to which the army operates, essentially, lawlessly. "Men in uniform" are not supposed to follow their own rules; they are supposed to follow the orders of their government, and various international regulations that would prevent them from committing war crimes. What's more, Ashfaq Mir's vilification of Muslims suggests that, although he himself is Kashmiri, he has bought into the mainstream Indian propaganda about Muslims being inherently violent.



Naga observes the extent to which Ashfaq Mir has essentially been brainwashed by the Indian government, and has to control himself not to challenge the army official. Instead, he turns his gaze towards a whiteboard on the wall, on which many names are listed. Next to half of the names, the word “killed” is written in parentheses. Before Naga says anything, Ashfaq says that all of the names are Pakistani and Afghani, insisting that the army never kills Kashmiri boys—“unless they are hard-core.” His “barefaced lie [hangs] in the air unchallenged.”

Seemingly out of nowhere, Ashfaq Mir offers to show Naga a Kashmiri militant. “Shall I order him for you?” he asks Naga. The militant arrives; he is a young, very thin boy named Aijaz, and several of his limbs are broken. Ceremoniously, Ashfaq Mir explains to Naga and Tilo that most militants are between 17 and 20 years old, and are “brainwashed, indoctrinated, and given a gun.” Quickly, Ashfaq Mir clarifies that Aijaz has been “neutralized.”

Naga, for his turn, realizes that Ashfaq Mir is offering a sort of Kashmiri deal, essentially exchanging an interview with Aijaz for Naga’s journalistic silence over whatever happened to Tilo the night before. Before leaving the room, Ashfaq turns to Aijaz and introduces Naga as a journalist. “He writes against us openly,” the Commandant explains, “but still we respect and admire him. This is the meaning of democracy. Some day you will understand what a beautiful thing it is.” When Naga doesn’t say anything, Ashfaq realizes that he wishes to interview Aijaz one-on-one, and makes a big show of leaving the room.

Aijaz knows who Naga is—the names of many left-wing Indian journalists circulate among members of the militancy, who believe their writing can be useful for the Independence cause. Believing the best about Naga, Aijaz bravely chooses to tell the truth—which isn’t what Ashfaq Mir has said at all. Aijaz reveals that he has been tortured, and that, not at all neutralized, he admires his jihadist mentors more than his own parents. In the middle of Aijaz’s speech, four policemen enter the room bearing excessive amounts of food. Ashfaq Mir serves the food himself on two plates—there is no plate for Aijaz. Once the military men have left the room again, Aijaz continues talking, revealing that the military supplies his militant group with weapons. He says he wants “to kill the murderers of [his] people,” and tells Naga to write that down.

Ashfaq Mir’s narrative about having been an advocate for Azadi who was converted to a functionary of the Indian Army makes him a useful asset to India because he can serve as an example to young Kashmiri men who may have been considering joining the resistance movement. It also makes the Indian Army’s position more convincing to have members of the ethnic group being persecuted within its ranks. Because of this, not only is Ashfaq Mir a product of propaganda, as Naga observes, he is also a perpetrator of propaganda.



Ashfaq’s use of the term “order” suggests his total disregard for the humanity of the militant. Order is a verb appropriate to use when speaking about food, not human beings. His complete failure to acknowledge that the boy has been severely beaten also suggests that he does not respect or even recognize the boy’s humanity.



Ashfaq Mir’s performative little speech about democracy is extraordinarily hypocritical given the nature of what he is doing. As Naga observes, Ashfaq Mir is trying to keep the media quiet about the Indian Army’s misstep—taking Tilo captive without real reason—by offering Naga an interview with a captive. Just as Biplab controls what elements of the Kashmiri conflict get media attention, Ashfaq Mir is trying to make sure that the entire truth of what has happened doesn’t get into the media. This obstruction of the freedom of the press stands in stark contrast to the democratic principles that Ashfaq Mir claims to espouse.



Here, while Aijaz’s courage is admirable, readers’ knowledge that Naga is a corrupt journalist calls into question whether his brave words are really worth sharing with Naga, who might not have the integrity to tell the story as it is. Not only does Aijaz expose Ashfaq Mir to be a liar (which Naga and Tilo had already expected anyway) by saying that he hasn’t been neutralized, he also adds another layer to readers’ understanding of the military’s corruption when he shares that the resistance’s weapons come from the army. Aijaz demonstrates that he has no fear of telling the truth, no matter the consequences, by frankly admitting that he wants to kill those that brutalize his people.



Ashfaq Mir soon reenters the room, asking Naga to reconfirm any facts from Aijaz before publication of the article. “He’s a terrorist, after all,” the Commandant says, “My terrorist brother.” Ashfaq gives Naga and Tilo permission to leave, and they do. In the car on the way back, Naga takes Tilo’s hand, and asks her whether she knows if Commander Gulrez was Musa. She replies that based on the way the body looked, she couldn’t tell. But this isn’t exactly the truth—based on the condition of the body, it is true, Tilo wouldn’t have been able to tell who it was. But she knows that it wasn’t Musa. It is based on this initial lie that their relationship is constructed—Tilo always remains a little mysterious, a little out of Naga’s grasp, and when she finally decides to leave him, he has been anticipating it for a while.

Still, when Tilo tells Naga she is leaving him, he is shocked and, taking the advice from a colleague, decides to beat her, if unconvincingly. This is all Tilo needs as impetus to leave him, and that very day, she packs some of her things and is gone as soon as Naga drives to work. Once Tilo is out of his life, Naga begins a “string of gloomy affairs” with women closer to him in social status. His mother’s favorite, a member of minor royalty, is nicknamed the Princess, and has “milk-white skin and glossy hair.” Naga asks the Princess if she would like to move in for a “trial run” and she says yes, but that she needs to liberate the home of Tilo’s chi before doing so. While packing up Tilo’s things, Naga comes across the medical files from Tilo’s mother’s stay at the hospital.

Naga has never met Tilo’s mother, Maryam Ipe, although he has heard of her. A Syrian Christian from South India, Maryam founded a very successful and innovative high school, focused on empowering young women to follow their dreams. Although Maryam claims that Tilo is her foster daughter, looking at photographs of the two of them, it is obvious that this is not true—the two are identical, save for their complexions. In fact, Maryam named Tilo, Tilotamma, which means “sesame seed,” because she was “jet-black” and tiny as a baby. Although Tilo is Maryam’s daughter by birth, Maryam for her whole life pretended she was her foster daughter, to spare her conservative Christian family the embarrassment of their daughter having given birth out of wedlock.

Ashfaq’s use of the term “reconfirm facts” is a thinly veiled request to be able to censure what Aijaz has said in the interview. This demonstrates further Ashfaq Mir’s fundamental disregard for the importance of a free press as a cornerstone of democracy. Furthermore, his strange reference to Aijaz as his “terrorist brother,” indicates his desire to justify the army’s cruelty by calling Aijaz a terrorist, while simultaneously upholding the myth that Ashfaq Mir, for being a Kashmiri himself, has empathy towards the Kashmiri people, whom he is supposed to protect, but in reality, tortures, brutalizes, and kills.



The fact that the Princess isn’t even given a real name suggests that the importance of her entire character comes from her social status and ability to uphold the traditional standards of femininity. She functions as a sort of doppelganger for Tilo, who is certainly no princess, but whom Naga loves for her independence, mystery, and quiet strength—all three traits that the Princess lacks. By making the Princess such a two-dimensional character, Roy demonstrates her own distaste for the norms and practices of upper-caste femininity.



Maryam Ipe is an interesting character, because she both defies what is expected of her traditionally as a woman and upholds the restrictions and expectations conventionally placed on women. Becoming a teenage mom and starting a school suggests that she has more independence than other women of her social standing might. But her ultimate lack of courage to claim Tilo as her own daughter—which clearly has detrimental effects on Tilo’s wellbeing and relationship with her family—indicates that she lacks the strength of character necessary to defy the gender norms imposed on her when it matters most.



Because Tilo has never been close with her mother, Naga is surprised when Tilo begins to visit Maryam every day in the office when the older woman has fallen ill. In the hospital, Maryam is so delirious that the doctors are surprised she has recognized her daughter. In her altered state, Maryam becomes obsessed with asking after the “caste, sub-caste, and sub-sub-caste” of the nurses who attend her before allowing them even to touch her. The nurses, familiar with this kind of behavior from patients, are generous and kind.

As Maryam’s health worsens, she becomes belligerent and uncooperative with everyone, constantly planning her escape from the hospital and insulting the nurses. The doctors think it would be best for her to be strapped to her bed, but Tilo doesn’t like this idea. So she comes up with a way to calm her mother down: she simply sits by her side and writes down whatever Maryam says, no matter how incoherent. Naga, now leafing through the piles of documents Tilo has left behind, finds these notes and begins to read them. The document reads as a pretty much incomprehensible stream-of-consciousness, but it does allow to see the extent to which Maryam has become preoccupied with class in her ill health. She constantly mentions the “shit-cleaner” caste, for instance. At one point, this upsets Tilo so much that she breaks a chair in the hospital.

Reading through the notes makes Naga realize that he still loves Tilo, and he tells the Princess he’s not able to be with her anymore. Meanwhile, Tilo is in the apartment she has rented from Biplab with the baby she has kidnapped. Tilo knows that no one in the neighborhood knows the truth about her baby, or suspects her of kidnapping. Still, she wants to be cautious, and asks her friend Dr. Azad Bhartiya for advice. He suggests that she and the baby flee to Jannat Guest House and Funeral Services, and gives Tilo Saddam Hussain’s contact card, which Tilo recognizes as the same card Saddam left when he followed her home from the protest the first night she had the baby. So, Tilo calls Saddam, and arranges for him to pick her and the baby up that evening.

As a feminist educator, Maryam is unlikely to have had the type of politics that would inspire her to speak openly about caste in this way, at least when she was healthy. But the fact that in a semi-conscious state Maryam chooses to speak obsessively about this subject suggests that even beneath the progressive politics of high-caste leftists, there is still a highly oppressive understanding of caste and class difference.



Because Tilo is much darker in complexion than her mother, readers are invited to consider whether her father was of a much lower caste than her mother’s family. (That Maryam named her daughter “sesame seed” because of her complexion reveals the extent to which Maryam wished to distance herself from any genetic association with her dark-skinned “adopted” baby.) Consequentially, it is clear why Maryam’s sudden obsession with caste is so upsetting to Tilo—the comments are not just hostile towards the nurses, they are triggering and unkind towards Tilo herself.



In this moment, the life Naga was about to begin with the Princess starkly contrasts the life Tilo is about to begin at Jannat Guest House and Funeral Services. Tilo’s departure from Naga’s life initiated him into a phase of taking social class more seriously. Class is the only reason he has been dating the Princess. Because Naga’s connection with Tilo is based on emotional affinity and not just class similarity, Naga realizes he can’t be with the Princess anymore and seems to want a relationship based on something more profound. Tilo, on the other hand, is about to leave behind entirely the rigid social structures that, for the most part, have rejected her all her life.



As she prepares to leave her home for good, Tilo—as Biplab does just days later, when he discovers her gone—goes through her things, looking for what she needs to bring with her as well as what she needs to hide. For her, the most “incriminating” things in her apartment are what Musa refers to as his “recoveries”—documents he salvaged from a flood that devastated Kashmir years earlier. Tilo contemplates whether she needs to bring them with her; after all, Musa has the only other key to her apartment. But the documents are very important: pictures of Musa’s daughter, Miss Jebeen, her mother, Arifa, and Musa’s artificial identification cards from various nationalities. On the back of an old airline ticket, Musa has written part of a mourning song. Tilo wonders what Musa was mourning, and thinks to herself, “A whole generation, maybe.”

On a half-written letter, Tilo reads Musa’s exhausted words: “I don’t know where to stop, or how to go on [...] there is weariness, but there is also defiance. Together they define me these days.” Indeed, Tilo thinks, it is shocking that Musa is still alive after so many years of involvement in the Kashmiri conflict. He feels that he is protected because he has faked his own death—“How can they kill me again?” he jokes with Tilo—but Tilo isn’t convinced, and worries for him.

Still going through boxes, Tilo comes across old mobile phones, guns, cyanide pills, ammunition, and newspaper clippings. On one article, someone has underlined a quote from the Chief Minister of Kashmir: “We can’t just go on digging all the graveyards up. We need at least general directions from the relatives of the Missing, if not pointedly specific information. Where could be the greatest possibility of their disappeared kin being buried?”

Finally, Tilo comes across a notebook filled with her own writing. She remembers how, in the days just after she left Naga, she traveled to Kashmir almost obsessively. She didn’t even see Musa every time she went. Rather, her travels centered around collecting documentation of the conflict, although with no particularly specific focus. There, she took pictures, wrote down seemingly arbitrary phrases and quotes, and collected memorabilia. Even she didn’t know, exactly, what she was looking for—the project was “an archive of recoveries; not from a flood, but from another kind of disaster.”

This is the first moment in the story where readers are exposed to Tilo’s perspective on the whole story. She has remained mysterious and secretive up until this point, but now, readers recognize that this is because she does not fully trust Biplab or Naga, from whose perspectives the majority of Tilo’s story has been told. At this moment, readers realize that Tilo, even if she herself is not involved in the Kashmiri resistance, is linked to the rebel side of the conflict through an intimate and conspiratorial relationship with Musa. Thus, Tilo positions herself on the side of the oppressed against the oppressors.



Musa’s quote here demonstrates his tremendous resilience and strength of character. That he is not only alive—which alone surprised Tilo—but also continues to be active in a seemingly unending and hopeless conflict demonstrates how deeply he believes in his cause, and how this deep belief gives him the power to continue even in the face of such difficulty and grief.



This quote from the Chief Minister of Kashmir is absolutely absurd, and cruel in its absurdity. Of course families of the dead and missing would have no way to guess where the “greatest possibility” of their family members being buried would be. That the Chief Minister of a region would ask his citizens for such impossible information demonstrates that he, as a government official, is woefully distant from the reality of horror that those who live under his rule experience.



The disaster Tilo refers to is likely the unending war and conflict in Kashmir. Like her Kashmiri-English alphabet, Tilo’s documentation project here seeks to tell the often-distorted narrative of Kashmir from a perspective that centers the Kashmiri people’s experiences rather than the Indian government’s propaganda.



Tilo has titled her book *“The Reader’s Digest Book of English Grammar and Comprehension for Very Young Children.”* In it are a series of mock test questions based on the horror of daily life in Kashmir. For instance, the first one tells the story of an old Kashmiri man, imprisoned by the military, whose son dies. On the day his son passes, the soldiers open his cell and let him out, saying, “you wanted Azadi? [...] Congratulations! Today your wish has come true. Your freedom has come.” Once he is released, the villagers “[cry] more for the shambling wreck who [comes] running through the orchard in rags [...] than they [do] for the boy who [has] been murdered.” Beneath, Tilo has written the questions: “Q1: Why did the villagers cry more for the shambling wreck? Q2: Why did the wreck shamble?”

The remaining stories in the book focus on detailing instances of corruption and violence on behalf of predominantly the Indian army, and also local militant groups. Innocent civilians are shot by unknown gunmen, framed for murder, jailed and tortured by police. An entry titled “Khadija says,” reads simply, “In Kashmir when we wake up and say ‘Good Morning’ what we really mean is ‘Good Mourning.’” The penultimate entry, titled “Nothing,” written by Tilo in the first person, reads, “I would like to write one of those sophisticated stories in which even though nothing much happens there’s lots to write about. That can’t be done in Kashmir. It’s not sophisticated, what happens here. There’s too much blood for good literature.”

Reading the book causes Tilo to remember her times with Musa outside of Kashmir. She recalls one instance in which the two accompanied a group of children from an army orphanage in Kashmir on a trip to Delhi. The two went with the group to the Red Fort to see the Sound and Light show. Of these trips, Musa believes that instead of teaching the children to “love their country,” as the army intends, the young Kashmiris are, instead, getting to know their enemies.

The last box Tilo has to unpack contains documents about Major Amrik Singh, which she and Musa have compiled together. Beneath the reports written by Ralph Bauer, the LCSW who helps Amrik Singh and his wife to get asylum in the United States, is a pile of documents Tilo has never seen before. They are all different police accounts of the murder of a Sikh in Kashmir. All accounts report the dead body wearing the same clothing, covered in blood, and with his eyes gouged out. The very last report incriminates Amrik Singh for the murder of the Sikh man, who, according to all witnesses, was innocent.

Tilo’s choice of a title for her book is ironic. Obviously, based on its contents it is an entirely inappropriate volume for “very young children,” and, in this way, parallels the stories Anjum would tell Zainab about her life when Zainab was a baby. But the absurd idea that these stories could be included in a book about English comprehension highlights how what happens in Kashmir is truly incomprehensible. In this story, for instance, it is obvious why the villagers cry more for the shambling wreck (because he has been tortured and has to live in mourning for his son) and why the wreck shambles (because he has been tortured). But what remains unclear or incomprehensible is the senseless cruelty behind the soldiers’ actions.



Tilo’s observation about the story she has told about Kashmir seems to be a thinly veiled comment by Roy about the nature of her entire book. Like Tilo’s Reader’s Digest, The Ministry of Utmost Happiness seeks to tell a story in which there is so much blood, violence, despair, and chaos that it would be impossible for it to be a sophisticated story “in which nothing much happens.” This, in turn, challenges the lack of action as a criterion for good literature for, if this the case, only literature about subjects that are less urgent than the egregious violence faced in many parts of the world can be considered “good.”



That the army would run an orphanage for children in Kashmir is tragically ironic. By this point, readers should understand that the reason there are so many orphans in Kashmir is precisely because of the intervention of the army. What’s more, the army clearly uses history as a tool for propaganda.



This passage presents still more evidence that Major Amrik Singh has profoundly abused his position of authority in the army. Gouging out the eyes of anyone—even if the Sikh had been, as all of the witness disprove, subject to investigation by the army—would have been an egregious surpassing of any violence that would have been necessary. Here, it becomes clear that Amrik Singh’s use of force has nothing to do with believing in India’s cause or wanting to win the war, but rather, with his own perverse taste for violence.



After reading through the documents, Tilo resolves to leave them—they are legal documents, after all, she thinks, and contain no incriminating evidence. She places Musa’s “recoveries,” including his gun, knife, phones, passports, and other identification documents in her freezer. She also stores Saddam Hussain’s card alongside these, so Musa will know where to find her if and when he comes looking. By three in the morning, she is packed and ready to go, and waits for Saddam to come and pick her up.

While she waits, Tilo is unable to sleep. At one point, she gets a mass text on her phone inviting her to celebrate International Yoga Day with a celebrated guru. She responds, writing, “Please let’s not.” Out the window, she sees three women who work in construction holding pickaxes and shovels as they wait for one of their children to pee. Watching them, Tilo thinks to herself that nothing in the city belongs to the women: “Not a tiny plot of land, not a hovel in a slum, not a tin sheet over their heads.” When they leave, the street is empty again.

But it isn’t long before Saddam Hussain arrives. He drives a garbage truck, in which he has picked up a dead cow to dispose of, as a form of disguise. He believes no police will stop a garbage truck. Tilo smells him almost as soon as she hears him.

When the posse arrives at Jannat Guest House and Funeral Services, Anjum is waiting. She has set up a party to welcome Tilo and the baby, and Zainab, Nimmo, Imam Ziauddin, and Ustad Hameed are all awaiting the arrival of the baby and her adoptive mother. Anjum has already set up a room for Tilo, although she was unsure of what kind of décor a “real woman, from the Duniya” would want. At Jannat Guest House and Funeral Services, thanks to her warm welcome, Tilo feels for the first time that “her body [has] enough space to accommodate all of its organs,” that she has “found a home for the rest of her life.” Anjum has cooked all night, and the party feasts at dawn, making sure to set aside some food for the homeless and the municipal officers Anjum is sure will come by later in the day.

Meanwhile, while the baby is passed around from arm to arm, she “embark[s] on her brand-new life in a place similar to, and yet a world apart from where, over eighteen years ago, her young ancestor, Miss Jebeen the First had ended hers.”

Although Tilo thinks the documents contain no incriminating evidence, they are the same ones that Biplab finds and reads when he arrives in her abandoned apartment, and which lead him to believe, almost immediately, that “something dangerous” is going on with Tilo. This goes to show how vastly different her and Biplab’s perception of political violence is.



The yoga celebration Tilo has been invited to contrasts with the reality of the women she sees who live on the street. While some members of Indian society have access to wellness practices like yoga, others don’t even have access to the toilet. That the women own nothing in the city is especially sad, given that, as they work in construction, they clearly participate in building the city, only for it to be owned by people whose realities are much more privileged than their own.



Saddam Hussain’s transporting a cow carcass is eerily reminiscent of his father’s profession, and of the reason his father was murdered. This speaks to the lack of class mobility in India.



Here, the strength of the community Anjum has managed to build around Jannat Guest House and Funeral Services shines through. That so many people would gather in the middle of the night to welcome a total stranger shows the strength of their commitment to one another. While Anjum assumes that Tilo will want a room that is similar to one she would find in the Duniya, Tilo herself couldn’t be happier to leave the real world behind, where she has always been an outsider. The fact that she feels at home at Jannat suggests that inside, she is just as distanced from mainstream society as Anjum.



Readers now know that Miss Jebeen is Musa’s daughter, and that she lived and died in Kashmir. The comparison between Kashmir and Jannat Guest House and Funeral Services stems from the fact that both places are marginalized in the eyes of mainstream Indian society.



CHAPTER 9

Miss Jebeen the First has always insisted on being called “Miss.” In the early years of the Kashmir occupation, being called “Miss” was one of the many obsessions that gripped the people of the valley—young ladies wanted to be called “Miss” and go roller skating, while young men wanted to become physical trainers. This culture boomed alongside the prevalence of weapons, grenades, spies, and special ops. Many of the fashionable young women also wanted to grow up and become nurses, although Miss Jebeen didn’t live long enough even to learn to roller skate. She is buried in the martyr’s graveyard, which has a sign at the entrance that reads, “We Gave Our Todays for Your Tomorrows.”

By the time she dies, Miss Jebeen hasn’t “notched up” many todays, but then again “the algebra of infinite justice [is] never so rude.” She is buried alongside her mother, Arifa Yeswi, who dies by the same bullet as her young daughter—it passes through Miss Jebeen’s temple into her mother’s heart. In photos of Miss Jebeen’s corpse, the blood from her bullet wound looks “like a cheerful summer rose arranged just above her left ear.” In the massacre in which mother and daughter die, 15 others are also slain.

For Kashmiris, the maintenance of the martyr’s graveyard is an act of resistance, respecting the lives of those who have fought to free Kashmir. When the graveyard was founded, a gunman from the resistance was the first to be buried there. Some believe, though, that an “empty duffel bag,” not a corpse, was buried. When asked whether this is true, one of the founders of the graveyards replies to his young interlocutor, “This is the trouble with you youngsters, you have absolutely no idea how wars are fought.” Of course, those who believe in the integrity of the graveyard assume the rumor about the duffel bag is just another lie perpetuated by the “Rumors Wing in Badami Bagh, Military HQ, Srinagar; just another ploy by the occupation forces to undermine” the resistance movement. (The existence of this wing of the military, it must be said, is also a rumor itself.)

In this passage, Roy discusses with levity and humor the ways in which Kashmiri culture flourishes in the face of the violence that plagues the region. Roy creates juxtaposition between something as sweet as a young child insisting on being called “Miss,” or young girls wanting to roller skate, and the rapid weaponization of the region. In doing this, she demonstrates how the Kashmiris’ resilience allows them to continue to tend to matters of daily life even in the midst of such violence.



That a young child would be viewed as a martyr for Kashmiri independence shows how dire the violence has become. Kashmiris are so desperate for freedom, and so many lives have been lost in the fight to obtain it, that they need to believe that somehow all of the death will lead to something in the future. By casting their dead as martyrs, Kashmiris attempt to make meaning out of what would otherwise be senseless violence.



In this passage, Roy examines from another angle the role of language and manipulation in conflict. Already, readers have been exposed to the government and military manipulating journalists in order to hold onto public support for the war. Dr. Azad Bhartiya, advocating for the end of many forms of oppression, calls himself a doctor even though he doesn’t have a doctorate because that way, people will believe him. Similarly, the Kashmiris seem to have started the martyr graveyard based on a lie, because they knew that such a graveyard would keep Kashmiris emotionally inspired to continue fighting for Azadi. In all three cases, no party believes that wars can be won with truth and truth alone. Rather, manipulation and exaggeration seem to be the only paths to victory in such a corrupt system.



Whether it was founded by a “real” martyr or not, the martyr’s graveyard in Srinagar is filling up “at an alarming pace.” As the resistance movement grows and conflict with the military becomes all the more commonplace, Kashmiri doctors, lawyers, students, and engineers alike are seduced by the idea of martyrdom. Exchanging the tools of their trades for machine guns, many Kashmiri young men join the various Islamic resistance organizations. In doing so, they commit to lives that, if short, are entirely dedicated to the movement for Kashmiri independence.

But passionate young men aren’t the only ones who are seduced by the myth of martyrdom. Also intrigued are Kashmir’s many, inevitable businessmen, who involve themselves in the increasing sales of grenades, guns, and other weaponry, distributing these “like parcels of choice mutton at Eid.” In the process, they become wealthy, and with wealth come both property and women.

In this climate, “dying [becomes] a new way of living” and “tombstones [grow] out of the ground like young children’s teeth.” There is a graveyard in every town in Kashmir, no matter how small the population. As the tourism industry evaporates and the military moves in with more and more men, the job market disappears—except, of course, for the gravediggers, for whom there is always far too much work.

The day Miss Jebeen and Arifa die, they are sitting on the balcony outside their home watching the funeral procession of a local professor who was active in the movement for Azadi but disagreed with the more radical new resistance groups. After several warnings from the militants, Abdullah continued to speak out against their action. And so, he was assassinated to prove to the people of Srinagar that “there was to be no more of that folksy, old-world stuff.” What the murdered professor disagreed with about the new resistance groups was their strict definition of Azadi: “What does freedom [Azadi] mean? There is no God but Allah.”

What’s most notable about this passage is that it emphasizes that Kashmiri martyrs aren’t, as one might expect, only limited to poor Kashmiris who wouldn’t have access to a high quality of life, anyway, and who are suffering more under the oppression of the military. Instead, the emotional pull to sacrifice oneself for Kashmiri independence is so strong that even those in positions of privilege, like doctors, lawyers, and engineers—people with more to lose, in a way, who have far more opportunity for success under the occupation, are also called to sacrifice themselves.



Previously, Biplab has revealed to readers that many Kashmiri businessmen profit from the “peace process,” which is a euphemism, ironically, for unending violence. Here, Roy provides further details about how capitalism influences some people to exploit Kashmiris’ emotional desperation for Azadi to make a profit.



While the imagery of so much death is extraordinarily bleak, there is also a way in which Kashmir’s relationship with death and dying demonstrates hope. No one would be martyr for a cause they didn’t think it was ever possible to achieve, after all. In this way, dying as a way of living is, in Kashmir, a tragic but profound expression of hope for freedom in the future, even if that future is very distant.



In this passage, Roy demonstrates the ways that religious extremism only serves to divide the Kashmiri population and, consequently, weaken it. The definition of “freedom” as “There is no God but Allah,” is so far from true freedom that it becomes unclear whether Kashmiris would be more liberated under the Indian government or under such an extremist, religious government, one that also discourages dissent through violence, as evidenced by the murder of the professor.



With the rise of the new resistance movement, the people of Srinagar are thrown into indecision. While, on the one hand, the less-strict militants are more pleasant to live with—they flirt with young women, write poetry, and are stylish—the “Strict Ones,” perhaps because they are so strict, seem more capable of winning the war against the Indian Army. Ultimately, the Strict Ones take over (not necessarily because they have the support of the people, but because they out-fight the less strict ones). But the struggle for control over the village for the militants is seemingly unending: each “line” of thought ends up creating “more lines and sublines. The Strict Ones beg[et] even Stricter Ones.” In this way, the militants fight against each other just as much as they fight against the Indian army’s occupation.

On the day of the professor's funeral, Arifa wants to honor the deceased professor but doesn't want to put Miss Jebeen in danger by going out into the street to join the funeral procession. They watch from the balcony, where Arifa imagines they are safe. Meanwhile, the Indian Border Security Force watches the funeral procession from the sidelines as well: hidden and barricaded in bunkers on the side of the road, with machine guns pointed at the mourners just in case something happens. Out of nowhere, there is an explosion “loud enough and close enough to generate blind panic.” The soldiers emerge from their bunker already shooting straight into the unarmed crowd. Even as the crowd runs away, soldiers shoot to kill into their backs. Thinking a bomb may have been thrown from a house, they shoot into the balconies. One of these bullets kills both Arifa and Miss Jebeen.

After the massacre is over, within an hour shops have reopened, the street has been cleaned —“blood [has been] directed into the open drains” and normalcy, “always a declaration,” has been declared. It is discovered that the explosion came from a car driving over an “empty carton of Mango Frooti on the next street,” but there is no further investigation into the causes of the massacre. In the public mind, “this [is] Kashmir. [The massacre is] Kashmir’s fault.”

When he buries his wife and daughter, Musa is quiet and withdrawn. In fact, he is so quiet and withdrawn that it seems suspicious, and, after the funeral, he is picked up from his home and taken to the Shiraz Cinema Interrogation Center.

Because violence has become so normalized in the Kashmir region, it is basically impossible even for resistance forces to maintain a posture of nonviolence. Those that are “less strict,” or less violent are, necessarily, replaced by those who are more willing to use violence to conquer the enemy and subjugate the people. By showing the ways in which both the Kashmiri resistance and the Indian Army are violent groups, Roy paints a complex and nuanced picture of the many reasons behind the continued conflict in the region.



In this passage, it is clear how the soldiers have come to regard the Kashmir population with no trust and no regard for their humanity. The response to the supposed explosion, when carefully investigated, does nothing to keep anyone safe. Shooting into the backs of people that are fleeing cannot be called self-defense on the soldiers’ part. Their use of force against the Kashmiri people is aimed at persecuting them rather than protecting them.



The fact that the “explosion” was really only a car driving over an empty carton of juice emphasizes that the massacre of so many innocent people was truly in vain. Under a just government, soldiers would be punished for this, but because the Indian government clearly has no interest in protecting or serving the people of Kashmir, nor does it want to be critical of its own men, an official investigation of the massacre is never even opened.



That a man being quiet and withdrawn at his wife and only child’s funeral is perceived as evidence of guilt highlights the lack of trust that the Indian Army has in the Kashmiri people. In reality, there are few responses more appropriate or natural to such a tragedy than being quiet and withdrawn.



Photographs taken of Miss Jebeen at her funeral become wildly popular in the world of the documentation of suffering. They are reprinted time and time again “in papers and magazines and on the covers of human rights reports that no one ever read[s].” In India, however, the photograph of the dead child is not met with as much sympathy from the audiences—they find the images of “Bhopal Boy,” one of the Union Carbide gas leak victims, to be much more compelling.

At the mass funeral in which Miss Jebeen and Arifa are buried, many young men, rage ignited inside them like a fire, begin leaping very high in the air “like flames kindled from smoldering embers.” The Indian army thinks this activity could be related to sympathies towards militant causes, and later, their informers “who mingle[] with the crowd and [shout] slogans as passionately as everybody else (and even mean[] them)” will submit photo evidence of the jumping young men, each of whom will, in the coming days, be taken into custody by the military.

When Musa is arrested, he is at home grieving Arifa’s and Miss Jebeen’s deaths after the funeral. His father, Showkat Yeswi, is the one to announce with surprise that Major Amrik Singh wishes to talk to Musa. Showkat is a close friend of the major—he supplies building materials to the military—and so isn’t too concerned that his son will go into custody.

When Musa arrives at the Shiraz Cinema interrogation center, he sees dozens and dozens of chained, tortured men on the floor of a brightly lit lobby, where the cinema’s old snack bar continues “to advertise things it no longer stock[s]” and now functions as a desk where those about to be tortured—or, if they’re lucky, truly just interrogated—are registered. Musa, however, isn’t registered, and goes straight up the stairs to Major Amrik Singh’s office, where he invites Musa to sit down and immediately tells the soldiers accompanying him to leave.

Miss Jebeen’s photographic competitor, so to speak, is only more popular in mainland India presumably because he is Hindu, and because the Indian population, due to the circulation of propaganda by the military and government, does not support the Kashmiri cause or people. Roy’s detail that Miss Jebeen’s image is on human rights reports that no one reads is a cynical evaluation of the superficiality of mainstream engagement with human rights.



Again, the soldiers are overly suspicious of Kashmiri citizens. It is perfectly natural for people to express anger at a mass funeral after a massacre. However, the soldiers are so on guard, so programmed to suspect Kashmiris of violence, that they subject those who expressed grief to interrogation. It is strange that the informers might even “mean” the slogans about Kashmiri freedom, and suggests that perhaps informers are people who don’t feel empowered enough to resist the military.



Musa’s father seems to be among the corrupt Kashmiri businessmen who profit off of the conflict. Although supplying building materials to the army isn’t as egregious as supplying something like weapons, it is still an action that makes Showkat complicit in the violence his community faces.



The soldiers’ failure to register Musa’s presence in the interrogation center indicates their corruption. This is likely because Musa is Showkat’s child, and therefore has the privilege to be treated differently from the other detained people. The juxtaposition between the old snack bar and the chained, tortured captives highlights how much Kashmir has changed under the conflict, and how extreme the violence is.



This isn't the first time Musa is crossing paths with Major Amrik Singh. The major has imposed his friendship on Musa's father, Showkat, who, although he does business with the military, doesn't necessarily want to be intimately involved with an army officer but can't refuse. After the major's first visit, Showkat begins to suspect his son of being part of a militancy group, checking his fingers for a "trigger callus" and asking Musa whether he knows anything about "boxes of 'metal' being moved through [their] family's orchards." Although Musa doesn't know anything, Showkat insists that his son be present for the major's next visit, in which the major takes of his belt to show his pistol to his guests. By the time this occurs, the people of Srinagar have already heard of the many disappearances and murders that Amrik is suspected of, and father and son alike become nervous.

In his office, the first thing Major Amrik Singh does is order tea and offer Musa his condolences, "genuinely unaware of the irony of picking up a man whose wife and child [have] just been shot and bringing him forcibly, under armed guard, to an interrogation center." Musa remembers all of the frightening things he has heard about the major, who seems to greatly enjoy his violent job. At some point, Musa heard that the Major, thrilled by the chase and capture game of killing militants, referred to himself as the "Jannat Express"—the jihadi militants' fast-track to their final destination, paradise. The major is even rumored to have released a high-priority terrorist that he had captured, only to enjoy the thrill of seeking him out again. Musa believes that it is in this manipulative, violent spirit, that he invites him to the interrogation center to apologize.

When the tea arrives, Musa recognizes the tea-bearer, a captive, formerly very successful, militant. The militant leaves the room after saluting and saying "Victory to India!" At this point, Major Amrik Singh subtly offers Musa a job in construction with the army, but Musa does not respond and asks to leave. As he walks out the lobby, where there is a "torture break" taking place, Musa makes eye contact with a bleeding boy whom he knows, and plans to tell the boy's mother, who is searching desperately for her son, that he has seen him.

But before Musa can make his final escape, Major Amrik Singh appears at the staircase, shouting that he has completely forgotten something. The something is a bottle of whiskey for Showkat—a subtle trick, for if Musa does not accept, "it would be a public declaration of war with Amrik Singh [...] which [makes] him, Musa, good as dead." But if he does accept, he admits that his Muslim father drinks, which would put his family in danger from the Islamist militant groups.

The major's relationship with Musa and his father is one of dominance disguised as comradeship and cordiality. Showkat can't refuse the major's offer of friendship, of course, because the major could kill him and his whole family on a whim. This power dynamic between the army and the Kashmiri people indicates an extreme abuse of power on the part of the army. Showkat and Musa represent two different approaches to occupation: Showkat is complicit and doesn't want to take sides, whereas Musa, as readers already know, believes strongly in the resistance movement and participates in it.



As Musa observes, the major seems to be totally emotionally out of touch with the grief and despair that Kashmiri citizens are dealing with, which indicates that he has dehumanized Kashmiri citizens in his mind. This is further evidenced by the major's obvious enjoyment of murdering people. His choice to jokingly refer to himself as "Jannat Express" demonstrates the cold cruelty with which he kills. Additionally, the fact that he is willing to let go of "high-priority" terrorists only to enjoy the search once again suggests that he doesn't even care about the real military responsibilities that he has. He just wants to play games with human lives.



At this moment, readers realize that Musa is likely to be deeply involved in the resistance, since he recognizes not one but two of the captured militants. Major Amrik Singh's offer to give Musa a job in construction is a distorted peace offer, as he wants to control Musa and make sure he is out of the resistance. By saying no, Musa refuses the chance at living a life in which he'll be more or less safe from being persecuted by the military.



That simply refusing a gift from Amrik Singh would cause Musa to be in danger of military persecution demonstrates the military's corruption. Members of the army should not be able to act, in a military capacity, on their personal disagreements with civilians. What's more, Amrik Singh takes advantage of the Muslim resistance factions' religious extremity to put Musa in danger. This is an example of the army pitting Kashmiri citizens against one another.



Knowing the risks of his decision, Musa does not accept the whiskey. That night, after writing a loving letter to the deceased Miss Jebeen and leaving a note for his sister to take to the mother of the boy he saw in the interrogation center, Musa leaves home indefinitely to begin his life underground. Although he never fully joins any particular group, he participates in various resistance groups, trying to persuade “his comrades to hold on to a semblance of humanity, not to turn into the very thing they abhor[] and [fight] against.”

When Musa has been on the run for nine months, Tilo comes to Kashmir for the first time. Tilo is at her usual tea stall when she receives a cryptic note from an unknown messenger bearing an address in Kashmir and a date for her to arrive. Although she has not heard from Musa in a long time, she goes, knowing the note has something to do with him. On her first bus ride into Kashmir, Tilo is struck by the beauty and fertility of the autumn season in the region. And yet, simultaneously, she is acutely aware that there are soldiers everywhere, in all of the beautiful apple orchards and paddy fields. Because she and everyone else on the train are “in the rifle-sights of a soldier, whatever they might be doing [...] they [are] a legitimate target.”

When Tilo’s bus arrives in Srinagar, a stranger meets her at the station and takes her to a houseboat on the lake. On the way to the boat, she learns that her escort’s name is Gulrez. The next day, as Tilo admires the small but lovely houseboat and the beauty of the surrounding lake, she and Gulrez get to know each other, and she learns that Musa will soon join them. Gulrez shows her pictures of Miss Jebeen and Arifa’s funeral, and Tilo understands that the women are Musa’s family. Musa finally arrives later that night, and although they are the same age, Tilo notices that Musa looks much older. She also notices the calluses on his trigger finger. Musa tells Tilo that he and Gulrez share the same name—in militant circles, Musa is known as Commander Gulrez.

Musa tells Tilo that Gulrez is a *mout*—in his words, someone who “lives in his own world, with his own rules.” One day, Gulrez thought he saw the Pakistani army coming to liberate the Kashmiris, and ran towards them, trying to kiss their hands. In response, the soldiers—who were from the Indian army—shot Gulrez in the thigh and beat him with their rifles, leaving him for dead. Traumatized, Gulrez now tries to run whenever he sees a soldier, which is “the most dangerous thing to do.” Musa adds that almost all of the *mout* have been killed in Kashmir, “because they don’t know how to obey orders.” Musa wonders if that’s why they need *mout* people—to teach them how to be free. Tilo challenges him, saying, “Or how to be killed?” To this, Musa responds, “Here, it’s the same thing. Only the dead are free.”

Musa’s choice not to commit to one specific group demonstrates his strength of character. While it likely would be easier for him to be fully integrated into one movement, he chooses to remain loyal to his core values. This commitment allows him to fight against the increasing violence, extremism, and corruption in the resistance groups.



Here, Roy juxtaposes Kashmir’s natural beauty with its heavy atmosphere of violence and fear. Tilo’s detailing of the natural fertility of the region, which symbolizes life, contrasts strongly with the soldiers’ chilling presence, which is a threat of death. The level of distrust that exists between soldiers and civilians is very clear in this passage: the bus passengers are so distrustful of soldiers that they fear being targeted even for doing nothing wrong.



Once again, the beauty of Kashmir contrasts sharply with the constant threat of violence. Tilo’s observation that Musa looks much older than she is, even though they are the same age, suggests that the burden of living under so much violence and the constant threat of being killed, particularly as a member of the resistance, has had a profound effect on Musa’s health. At this point, readers already know that Commander Gulrez is the “A-category terrorist” whom Major Amrik Singh captures when he arrests Tilo. Readers know now that it is Gulrez, and not Musa, who is captured at that point.



The soldiers lack compassion for Gulrez, who, because he seems to suffer from developmental or mental health problems, cannot be expected to respond to the military in the same way that an able-bodied, able-minded person would be able to. That the military responds to him not with empathy, but with excessive violence, shows their lack of respect, or even goodwill, for the Kashmiri people. Musa’s grim observation that “only the dead are free” colors readers’ understanding of the martyrdom trend in the region—perhaps those who sacrifice themselves aren’t only trying to free their homeland, but are also trying to be free of the stress of living under constant violence.



After dinner, Musa begins to tell Tilo about his family. When she asks about Arifa, immediately wanting to know if Musa loved her, he says yes, and that he had wanted to tell Tilo out of respect for their relationship. He shares that he met Arifa “in the most horrible way” in 1991, when Kashmiris thought Azadi was about to be theirs. Hearing about Musa’s wife makes Tilo remember when she had thought of him as “her people” and “they had been a strange country together for a while, an island republic that had seceded from the rest of the world.”

Distracted by talking about the wildness of 1991 in Srinagar, Musa interrupts his story and asks Tilo if they should go inside. Before entering Tilo’s bedroom, he asks if he can come in, which makes her feel sad and distanced from him. But she soon forgives him, and kisses him as he sits on her bed. After they make love—although it is “less lovemaking than lament,” they hold each other and momentarily reject the real world they live in “call[ing] forth another one, just as real. A world in which *maet* [give] orders and soldiers need[] eardrops so they [can] hear them clearly and carry them out correctly.”

As she lies on top of Musa, Tilo remembers a day when the two were in college together and Maqbool Butt, a revolutionary Kashmiri separatist, was hanged publicly in Delhi. At the time, she herself didn’t pay much attention, nor did any other student at the university. But Musa said to her with quiet intensity, “Some day you’ll understand why, for me, history began today.”

While in bed together, Musa shares with Tilo the story of Gulrez’s rooster, Sultan. Gulrez was very attached to the animal, who followed him everywhere like a dog. One day, the army arrived in Gulrez’s village and made everyone assemble. Sultan, of course, came and stood beside Gulrez. One of the army captains sent his dog to kill Sultan, and the soldiers took the dead rooster to eat for dinner. Since then, Gulrez curses Sultan, saying, “If you didn’t know how to live with the military, why did you come into this world?”

The language surrounding Tilo’s independence often compares her to a sovereign country. Roy correlates freedom and independence with total separation from the rest of the world. This is similar to what Anjum creates for herself at Jannat Guest House and Funeral Services, and it is also what Kashmiris seek for themselves in the struggle for independence. In this way, Roy paints isolation and separatism as true forms of liberation.



*In this moment, Tilo and Musa’s vision for an ideal world is one in which the current power structures are reversed. Rather than living under the rule of the powerful, of the privileged, Tilo and Musa dream of living under the rule of *maet*—people with special needs—who, currently, are at the very bottom of the social pyramid. In this way, liberation is born not of marginalized people merely separating from mainstream society, but coming to dominate it.*



Musa’s comment that history for him begins at the moment he becomes passionate about Kashmiri independence is another moment where Roy emphasizes the importance of representation in history. For Musa, the events of India’s history up until that moment lack significance, because they do not address the needs or experiences of people from his region. However, Maqbool Butt’s hanging is a historical event that is directly tied to Musa’s own experience, which makes it not only relevant to him, but critical in forming the meaning of his life.



This tragic story is yet another example of the military’s commonplace brutality in Kashmir. Killing Sultan is nothing more than a game and a show of dominance for the military, and yet Sultan is one of the most important parts of Gulrez’s life. Gulrez’s implication that no being should come into the world of Kashmir without knowing how to live under the military is equally sad, and suggests that he understands military occupation to be a constant, unending fact of Kashmiri life.



The two continue talking into the night, and Musa finally tells Tilo the story of Miss Jebeen and Arifa. The “horrible way” in which he met Arifa, apparently, was in the middle of a bombing. Musa went out wearing nice boots after a fight with his father, who told him to take them off, because they made him look like a militant. Musa left anyway to run errands at the stationary store, and a grenade exploded on the street right outside. Soldiers attacked everyone in all the stores, destroying everything they see, and beating Musa. When they left him, he checked to see if his new boots were okay, when he saw Arifa resting her head on them. For him, “it was like waking up in hell and finding an angel on [his] shoe.” Seemingly unperturbed by the bombing, Arifa smiled at Musa and said, “Nice boots.”

Tilo and Musa soon fall asleep and, when they wake up, Tilo watches Musa say his prayers—something she has never seen him do before. Afterwards, Musa comes to her and tells her that the hardest thing for Kashmiris to fight against is, surprisingly, pity. For them, self-pity is easy to fall into, but at the same time, it is “debilitating” and “humiliating.” For him, rather than Azadi, the conflict is a fight to maintain the dignity of the Kashmiri people. But he believes that in order to fight, Kashmiris must “simplify [...] standardize [...] and] reduce [themselves]...everyone has to think the same way, want the same thing...[they] have to make [themselves] as single-minded...as monolithic...as the army [they] face.”

Musa leaves soon after describing this to Tilo, and tells her to wait for a woman called Khadija to show her around Kashmir. Tilo travels with various friends of Musa’s around Kashmir, seeing orchards upon orchards and graveyards upon graveyards. At one point, she meets a woman whose brother died. The hands of his corpse, when it was brought home, “were full of earth and yellow mustard flowers grew from between his fingers.”

Here, it is clear that Musa is attracted to Arifa because of her strength of character. Her ability to remain so casual and cool-headed even in the middle of a bombing is a form of resilience. Arifa doesn’t allow the violence of her surroundings stop her from flirting with a man she thinks is attractive. Her insistence on continuing to life live relatively normally, in spite of the daily threats of death and violence, demonstrates her great courage in the face of adversity.



Musa’s thoughts on how Kashmiris can achieve victory seem to conflict with the other views on freedom that Roy has presented in the novel. Musa seems to think that Kashmiris need to, essentially, ignore or erase all types of intellectual and religious diversity that exist among them. While differences in opinion do separate Kashmiris from one another, the prospect of turning Kashmiris into a people as “monolithic” as the army itself is bleak. This would, necessarily, limit people’s freedom of thought and expression. In Anjum’s portion of the story, by contrast, Roy paints the freedom the people at Jannat Guest House and Funeral Services experience as one that celebrates diversity and difference, and manages to create community in spite of these obstacles.



The image of the flowers growing out of the clenched fist of a corpse symbolizes resilience and hope. Flowers symbolize life, and that they would grow from between the fingers of a murdered body suggests that life will tenaciously persist in spite of all of the violence that surrounds it. The flowers symbolize hope for the future of Kashmir.



After Tilo's travels around the valley, she returns to the houseboat alone where she was with Musa. Briefly, Musa dines with her one evening, but is much more stressed than he was the last time they were together. Eighteen have been killed in the city that day. Musa leaves right after dinner, asking her not to come out onto the balcony to say goodbye to him, although she doesn't listen. In the middle of the night, the police and military break into the houseboat, beating Gulrez and demanding to know where "he" is. They gag Tilo and tie her hands behind her back. Every time Gulrez tells them that he doesn't know where "he" (presumably, Musa) is, the police beat him harder. The police guide the blindfolded Tilo and the wailing Gulrez onto a boat, surrounding both with armed guards.

The man in charge is a Sikh officer in a green turban, and Tilo guesses correctly that he is Major Amrik Singh. Tilo prays that the police squadron will not catch up with Musa, who departed just an hour before, hidden at the bottom of a rowboat. And her prayer is answered, although by someone "unlikely to [be] God." Musa is nowhere to be found, but when the soldiers dock the boat, Tilo hears a gunshot and an explosion. They return with "no Gulrez," but carrying a "heavy, shapeless sack that needed more than one man to lift." Gulrez, who "left the boat as Gul-kak Abroo return[s] as the mortal remains of the dreaded militant commander Gulrez," and the death count for the day shoots from eighteen to "eighteen plus one."

Once his men have murdered Gulrez, Major Amrik Singh tells Tilo that she has been charged with "being the accomplice of a terrorist," but that nothing will happen to her if she tells them everything. He wants to know everywhere she's been while in Kashmir, everyone she's met, and how she knows Gulrez. The major reminds Tilo that he and his team "already know the details," and that she won't be helping them; on the contrary, they will be testing her. But stubbornly, filled with hatred for the major's blank, emotionless stare, Tilo resolves not to say anything, no matter what the circumstances.

When the boat docks in front of the Shiraz Cinema Interrogation Center, Tilo is handed over to ACP Pinky for questioning. ACP Pinky brings Tilo into the interrogation room, which, with its ample supply of "hammers, screwdrivers, pliers, ropes" and other assorted equipment, does not make much of an effort at disguising its true function as a torture chamber. The Assistant Commandant gives Tilo a piece of paper and tells her to write, warning her not to waste her time. On this paper, Tilo writes the message "G-A-R-S-O-N H-O-B-A-R-T" for Biplab.

Here, Tilo gets a taste of the violence that Musa lives in fear of every day, as the soldiers begin beating Gulrez seemingly without even confirming his identity. Their assumption that Gulrez is lying to them, without having any evidence at all that this is the case, demonstrates their lack of respect for him and, in a way, their lack of respect for their own work. If what they really cared about was finding "him," they might recognize that capturing and torturing Gulrez is a waste of time.



In this passage, the contrast between the "Gul-kak Abroo" (Tilo and Musa's nickname for Gulrez) that leaves the boat, and the "dreaded militant commander" that returns dead to the boat highlights the military's corruption. At no point have they confirmed Gulrez's identity or affiliation with the military. However, the soldiers are so eager to claim having taken out an important terrorist that they kill him with no proof of his culpability.



Again, the major's claims against Tilo are unfounded, since they have no evidence that Gulrez was a terrorist (and, indeed, he wasn't). The major's attempt to intimidate Tilo by implying the military has been following her every move is further evidence of his cruelty. Tilo demonstrates her strong character and independence by resolving not to say anything to the major, no matter what dire consequences this may cause her to face.



The description of the "interrogation center" demonstrates how superficial the military's attempts at disguising its war crimes are. Because they know they are unlikely to face any sort of consequences for violating Kashmiri citizens' rights, the army is able to openly operate a torture chamber.



When ACP Pinky returns to the room, she is in the company of Major Amrik Singh, and Tilo observes from their behavior with one another that they are “more than just colleagues.” When the major reads Biplab’s name on the note that Tilo has written, he asks how she knows him. ACP Pinky doesn’t miss a beat, and asks Tilo how many men she sleeps with at the same time. Tilo doesn’t respond, not out of resilience, but out of exhaustion. Still, ACP Pinky observes that the major seems to admire Tilo’s quiet strength, and she suspects that it is for this admiration—not, as the major says, because Tilo has written down the name of a high-ranking official—that he tells Pinky to “find out what [she] can” but without leaving any injury marks on Tilo.

Offended by her lover’s attention to Tilo, ACP Pinky is upset that she hasn’t been allowed to leave injury marks. Under this constraint, she hardly knows how to torture someone, as no injury marks “[is] not a courtesy extended to Kashmiris.” She slaps and kicks Tilo (slaps and kicks “[come] under the category of ‘questioning’” and not torture) but receives no response. Meanwhile, Major Amrik Singh has gotten in touch with Biplab, and realized just how important an official Tilo’s contact is. He rushes back to the room to make sure ACP Pinky hasn’t done Tilo any real damage, and discovers that his colleague has “found a cheap, clichéd way around her problem” and has had the military camp’s barber shave Tilo’s head.

Upset that ACP Pinky has done this to Tilo, Major Amrik Singh attempts to make up for it in some way by “put[ting] a huge hand protectively on her scalp—a butcher’s blessing. It [will] take Tilo years to get over the obscenity of that touch.” He apologizes, and orders for talcum powder and a balaclava to put on Tilo’s head.

Two hours later, Naga arrives to collect Tilo, escorted into the room where she waits by the cheerful Ashfaq Mir. Half an hour later—after Ashfaq has offered them food, brought them Aijaz to interrogate, performed an overly ceremonious handover—Naga brings Tilo to the hotel where he is staying, hands her two sleeping pills, and orders for hot water to be brought for her to have a bath. Tilo is surprised by his consideration, which is a trait she has never recognized in him before. Naga suggests that they take the next flight to Delhi, but Tilo doesn’t want to leave Kashmir until she hears from Musa. Luckily, the next morning, Khadija knocks on her door, bearing news.

ACP Pinky chooses to shame Tilo for, presumably, sleeping around, in order to hurt Tilo. In doing so, the army official uses the rigid gender norms imposed on women to create a narrative about Tilo that she assumes will make Tilo ashamed. The irony in this moment is not only that readers know Tilo isn’t sleeping with Biplab, but also that Tilo, being so different and unattached to the norms society imposes on her, is unlikely to care whether ACP Pinky thinks she sleeps with dozens of men at once. Because Tilo doesn’t value the social norms, ACP Pinky’s abusive technique is unlikely to be effective.



In this passage are two important indications of the military’s brutality and corruption. Firstly, that ACP Pinky would have no idea how to question someone without leaving marks on their body shows the extent to which the military depends upon egregious violence in their work. Furthermore, it is highly corrupt that Tilo is able to escape her military detention simply because she knows someone in a position of power. What’s more, ACP Pinky’s choice to shave Tilo’s head to torture her demonstrates the extent to which she buys into the importance of traditional female beauty standards, as she assumes Tilo will be devastated to lose her hair.



The use of the term “butcher’s blessing” harkens back to Anjum’s use of “butchers” to refer to the Hindu extremist terrorists in Gujarat. By using the word to describe the Indian Army and Hindu extremists alike, Roy draws readers’ attention to the similar ideologies that are the backbone of each organization.



The comfort Tilo has access to now that she has been able to leave the interrogation center contrasts starkly with the mistreatment she suffered at the hands of the army before they knew of her important connections. The interrogation center and Naga’s hotel are worlds apart. The difference between the two experiences goes to show the extent to which one’s personal connections to privilege shape one’s experience with government organizations, like the military. Tilo is safe only thanks to her country’s corruption.



Khadija has brought Tilo a fresh change of clothes and invites her to go with her through the city. She tells Tilo that Musa is alive, and plans to attend Gulrez's funeral. Together, they "step[] out of the hotel and into the streets of the city that [comes] alive only when it [has] to bury its dead." In the city, the streets are packed with people who have come to honor the funerals of Gulrez and the others that died the day before. Even small children shout Azadi, showing their solidarity with the martyrs that have died. Tilo tells Khadija that she wants to attend the funeral as well, but Khadija responds saying that no women are allowed near the grave, anyway. Tilo wonders, "[Is] it to protect the grave from the women or the women from the grave?"

Khadija takes Tilo to a safe corner of the city, where it seems that militants rather than the army are in charge. There, she gives Tilo her backpack, which someone has saved from the houseboat, and invites Tilo to take a nap and have some tea. Musa will arrive in two or three hours, Khadija explains. When he arrives, he sits next to Tilo on the mattress Khadija has laid out, "wishing he could wake her up into another, better world." He tells Tilo that it isn't safe for her to stay alone when she goes back to Delhi, that she should live with friends, or someone like Naga. He promises that they will win the Kashmiri war, and that after that, he and Tilo will be together again—although this never does happen.

Before going back to the hotel, Tilo and Khadija go to visit Gulrez's grave. While at the graveyard, Tilo also pays a visit to Miss Jebeen's grave, as well as Arifa's. Back at the hotel, Tilo knocks on Naga's door in the middle of the night, and the two sleep together "on a purely secular basis."

When Tilo has been married to Naga for two months, she discovers that she is pregnant, although she and Naga have never slept together. Knowing the father is Musa, Tilo considers keeping the baby, naming it Gulrez if it's a boy or Jebeen if it's a girl. Tilo has no particular desire to be a mother, and ultimately, fearing that the baby she brings into the world will have to navigate the same painful challenges that she has had with her own mother, Maryam, Tilo chooses to abort. She does not have enough money to go to a private hospital, and doesn't want to ask Naga, so she goes to the public hospital.

Here, again, the Kashmiris' insistence upon honoring every person killed in the conflict, no matter how many, demonstrates their resilience as a community. They could respond to so much death with defeatism, but instead, they continue to honor lives lost. Khadija also demonstrates resilience in her pragmatism. She is unphased by Tilo's having been taken into police custody, and simply shows up with the change of clothes she knows Tilo will need and continues with normal life. Khadija's strength and dedication to her cause is remarkable, and these traits make it especially ironic that someone with such emotional fortitude and commitment to Kashmiri liberation wouldn't be allowed near the graves of the dead. Khadija and the other women of Kashmir, the novel suggests, can certainly handle the grief, and certainly deserve to participate in the rituals given all they sacrifice for Kashmir.



Here, readers realize that the whole reason Tilo marries Naga points back to Musa. Tilo wants cover so that the government won't persecute her for her involvement with Musa and the Kashmir conflict, and so she uses Naga's position of social and political power to protect herself. Naga is only powerful because he is corrupt, and so, in this way, Tilo finds a safe space to act on her radical politics by hiding behind someone whose politics are carefully monitored and controlled by the government.



That Tilo has only been in Kashmir a matter of weeks and already has three graves to visit goes to show the shocking extent of violence, death and political persecution in the region.



Although Tilo decides that having her own child is not an appropriate way to honor the lives of the loved ones she has lost, she does go on to pay homage to Gulrez and Miss Jebeen in different ways. Tilo's inspiration to help the Kashmir conflict comes from her honoring of Gulrez's unjust death, and her choice of the name Miss Jebeen the Second for her adopted baby comes from Miss Jebeen. In this way, Tilo keeps the spirits of her dead loved ones alive by honoring their legacies in her own life.



There, she is treated with hostility by patients and doctors alike, who believe that abortion is immoral. The doctors tell her they cannot use anesthetic unless they have a signed consent form from someone who's accompanied her, "preferably the father of the child." Tilo agrees to abort even without it, and passes out during the operation from pain. When she wakes up, she is in the general ward, where there is more than one patient in every bed. She observes that it feels "like a wartime ward. Expect that in Delhi there [is] no war other than the usual one—the war of the rich against the poor." When she leaves the hospital, Tilo goes to an "abandoned Muslim graveyard" behind the hospital to rest. She falls asleep on a grave and, when she wakes up, feels "better prepared to go home and face the rest of her life."

The doctors' hostility towards Tilo shows their sexism and lack of belief that Tilo should be able to choose what to do with her own body. Withholding anesthetic unless the male parent consents to the abortion is further evidence that the doctors believe that a woman's husband and not the woman herself should mandate what happens to her body. The poor condition of the public hospital shows the government's disregard for the lives of the poor. Roy's symbolic placement of the graveyard behind the government hospital suggests that in the hospital, the care is so bad that it's a place people go to die.



CHAPTER 10

Back at Jannat Guest House and Funeral Services, word has spread that a "clever woman" has begun holding classes in the graveyard. Parents from neighborhoods all around are eager to enroll their children in Tilo's new school. She teaches "arithmetic, drawing, computer graphics [...] a bit of basic science, English and eccentricity." She hasn't been back to her old apartment since she moved into the Jannat Guest House community with Miss Jebeen the Second, even though she has received Biplab's message through Anjum and Saddam Hussain. In all this time, Tilo still hasn't heard from Musa, but she is less worried about the prospect of his death—not because she no longer loves him, but "because the battered angels in the graveyard that [keep] watch over their battered charges [hold] open the doors between worlds [...] so that the souls of the present and the departed [can] mingle."

Tilo's work as a teacher for poor children demonstrates her commitment to justice and inclusion. Roy likely includes the detail that Tilo teaches "eccentricity" to highlight that Tilo understands the value of nonconformity and passes this on to her students. Indeed, if it weren't for Tilo's eccentricity and rejection of the mainstream capitalist values—her willingness to value access to education over money—the school likely would not exist. Tilo's understanding of the graveyard angels even further expands the already inclusive community that Anjum has created in the graveyard. Not only are people from all social classes present there, but so are the spirits of the dead.



Since Tilo's arrival, the Jannat Guest House community has grown more family-like. Ustad Hameed begins giving singing lessons to promising students there, which Anjum attends (although she refuses to sing). Zainab comes around often to help Anjum and Tilo look after Miss Jebeen the Second, and, when she's not busy with that, nurses a full-fledged romance with Saddam Hussain. What's more, the Guest House is not only full of human life, but also full of animals. Zainab and Saddam Hussain have collected cows, an injured peacock, birds, a small tortoise, and a whole slew of other creatures, bringing them all to find a home in the Jannat graveyard. Behind the house, the tenants grow a vegetable garden that, although few of them actually enjoy eating vegetables, provides them with legumes, tomatoes, and gourds. Some of the addicts in the graveyard help with the garden and with caring for the animals.

Here, the many forms of life that flourish in the graveyard serve as yet another example of resilience. Like the mustard flowers that grow from between the fingers of the corpse, vegetables, injured animals, and human life flourishes in the midst of a graveyard, which traditionally is a place where people go only to die. What's more, Anjum has created the opportunity for the addicts who live in the graveyard to reinvent themselves. Society has given up on them, abandoning them to die by their own substance addiction. The addicts, though, demonstrate resilience by managing to live productive lives in spite of the condition they live with.



Anjum even arranges for Jannat Guest House to have a swimming pool—“Why should only rich people have swimming pools?” she says, indignantly. There is no water, but the poor know how to appreciate the pool all the same. And, “all in all, with a People’s Pool, a People’s Zoo, and a People’s School, things [are] going well in the old graveyard. The same, however, [cannot] be said of the Duniya.” Back from Baghdad, D.D. Gupta describes it to Anjum as “hell on earth,” and says he no longer has the stomach for so much violence. He has also become a regular at the Guest House, spending whole afternoons watching TV with Anjum. In other bad news, Gujarat ka Lalla, the Hindu fundamentalist, is India’s new Prime Minister.

Encouraged by seeing a Prime Minister who aligns with their political beliefs, the “**saffron** parakeet” Hindu fundamentalists that Anjum so fears have infiltrated “university campuses and courtrooms” alike. Centuries of Muslim rulers are removed from history books, the poetry and art that thrived under their rule reduced only to tales of violence and subjugation. Hindu pilgrims are accompanied by armed escorts to holy sites. One day, Nimmo tells the crowd at the guest house that she saw a man beaten to death in front of his family by a mob that accused him of eating beef. She warns Anjum to be careful about having cows on her property, but Saddam Hussain disagrees. “Careful in what way?” he says, “The only way you can be careful with these bastards is by ceasing to exist!” No one has ever seen him lose his temper like this before.

Shortly after on Independence Day, Anjum and Saddam Hussain are watching TV when they hear Zainab screaming from outside. She is terrified of what she sees in front of her: a crow that seems to be frozen mid-flight, “a feathered Christ, hanging askew, on an invisible cross.” A crowd gathers to gawk at what seems to be a terrible omen. Saddam, though, doesn’t take long to realize what has happened: the crow’s wing has gotten stuck on a kite string. Innovative as ever, Saddam ties a rock to a rope and throws it over the kite string, freeing the crow. As it “magically” flies away, “normalcy [is] declared.”

The fact that Jannat Guest House and Funeral Services is able to flourish even while the rest of the world becomes “hell on earth” shows how distanced Anjum and her community are from the goings on of the rest of the world. D.D. Gupta’s rejection of the Duniya and its violence suggests that the more extreme the conservative government becomes, the more polarized its people are. D.D. Gupta previously was a somewhat corrupt but relatively neutral person. Now that the violence has grown so extreme, it has driven him to prefer living on the margins of society.



The erasure of Muslim rulers from history books is a means of disempowering and disrespecting the Muslim population in India. In order to subjugate the Muslim population to oppression, the Hindu nationalists seek to remove historical evidence of their dignity, power, and accomplishments. In refusing to be afraid of the Hindu fundamentalist mobs, Saddam Hussain shows his courage. He of all people understands how dangerous these groups can be—after all, they killed his father. But Saddam refuses to let extremist groups win by cowering before their terrorism. He insists on continuing to live his life the way he wishes to.



Based on the conversation the characters are having in the moments preceding the arrival of the crow, the crow could represent India’s failure to make progress towards becoming a nation that treats all of its citizens with justice and respect. Nimmo has just detailed the ways in which Hindu extremist groups are rewriting India’s history to be more intolerant and religiously biased, returning to value systems that reflect more India’s caste-obsessed, intolerant past than a progressive future. In this way, India, like the crow, is immobilized.



His moment of heroism gives Saddam Hussain a boost of confidence, and he decides that night to ask Anjum for Zainab's hand in marriage. Anjum responds sassily, asking him why Zainab should marry a man "wanting to commit a crime and then be hanged like Saddam Hussein of Iraq?" Surprisingly, Saddam swears that he is done with that phase of life, done with his revenge fantasy. He even deletes his treasured video of Saddam Hussein's hanging from his phone to prove to Anjum that he is serious. Instead, he shows her a video of young Dalit men, contracted to remove dead cows from upper-caste properties, flinging cow carcasses into the property of the local District Collector in Gujarat. Saddam Hussain explains that because his people have risen up, he no longer needs to kill the police officers that allowed his father to be murdered.

Anjum, ultimately, is delighted to accept Saddam Hussain as her son-in-law, and wedding preparations are soon underway. Before the wedding, though, Saddam wants to take the entire family on a surprise outing. So he, Anjum, Tilo, Nimmo, Saeeda, Zainab, and Miss Jebeen the Second all set out together and head to a wealthy part of town, where Saddam leads them into a mall. There, the family eats at an outlet restaurant, where Nimmo and Anjum need some help, as they have never been in a restaurant before. Saddam explains that he wanted to take everyone to the mall because it is the exact spot where his father was murdered by the mob years before. "Before [the mall] came, there were villages here, surrounded by wheat fields," Saddam explains.

Concerned for the ghost of Saddam's father, Anjum suggests they give him a proper burial at Jannat Funeral Services. So the group buys a nice shirt from the mall to represent his spirit to bury in the old graveyard. Zainab, remembering the Gayatri mantra Anjum had taught her when she was a child, offers to say the only Hindu prayer she knows in memory of her deceased father-in-law. Tilo, too, chooses to participate in the impromptu funeral ceremony, and brings her mother's ashes, which she has never disposed of, to the table. She explains that the church had refused to bury her mother, so she doesn't need Christian prayers in particular. Instead, Tilo recites her mother's favorite Shakespeare passage.

Saddam Hussain and Zainab are soon married at a party where all of Jannat Guest House's community members are present to celebrate. After the wedding, Anjum takes the two to the shrine of Hazrat Sarmad Shaheed, where her own mother took her 60 years ago to bless her as a baby. Anjum, in turn, asks the saint to bless the young couple. And the saint—"Hazrat of Utmost Happiness, Saint of the Unconsoled and Solace of the Indeterminate, Blasphemer among Believers and Believer among Blasphemers"—in keeping with what he had given to Anjum, blesses them.

Here, Saddam Hussain shows readers that he has changed his value system. Whereas before, he seemed to think it was necessary to fight violence with violence—he wanted to murder police officers, and he admired Saddam Hussein—he now seems to believe that social change is possible through nonviolent uprisings, like the Dalit men throwing cow carcasses on upper-caste people's property. The latter form of justice is more conducive towards building a tolerant society. Roy seems to privilege this perspective by presenting it as one that Saddam has grown into. Nonviolence is cast as mature rather than reactionary.



In this moment, the revelation that Nimmo and Anjum have never been to a restaurant before shows readers how marginalized and impoverished the backgrounds they come from are. On the other hand, the fact that Anjum is now able to afford going to a restaurant, presumably through the many businesses she runs out of Jannat Guest House and Funeral Services, suggests that she has been able to generate wealth for herself even without subscribing to the norms or values of a capitalist society.



In this moment, the characters perform funeral ceremonies that are a grab-bag combination of various teachings and religions. This is the epitome of inclusivity: the characters all demonstrate respect for the teachings of religions or, in Tilo's case, authors, by referencing them in this ceremonious context. However, unlike many other representations of religion in the novel, the way the characters here engage with these teachings is not with extremism or rigidity, but with flexibility.



Towards the end of Anjum's life, Shaheed's blessing is far more obvious than it was at the beginning of her life. In keeping with the saint's spirit, Anjum has had the resilience to endure tremendous difficulty, and the wisdom to value love and community over anything else. This has gifted her with a rich life full of community and meaning. The implication is that Zainab and Saddam will have the same.



One morning, Dr. Azad Bhartiya comes to Jannat Guest House and Funeral Services with a letter. Anjum, Tilo, Saddam Hussain and Miss Jebeen the Second gather round to read the letter aloud. The letter is addressed to Azad Bhartiya, whom the sender of the letter observed at Jantar Mantar and judged to be of good character. The speaker is a Telugu woman and full-time activist with the Maoist Communist Party of India. She warns that when this letter will be received, she will already be dead.

The speaker in the letter introduces herself promptly as Revathy, the mother of the baby that was abandoned at Jantar Mantar—Miss Jebeen the Second—whom she named Udaya, which, in her language, means sunrise, as the baby was born at dawn. She explains that, after a childhood full of poverty and hardship, she joined the Communist Party while she was in government school to advocate for a better future for herself and people in her community. After graduating, she became very involved in the Communist cause—so involved that she was a target for police. One day, she was captured by police, who held her captive, torturing and raping her. Catching them off guard, she escaped, although she was very ill and soon discovered she was pregnant.

When her baby was born, Revathy remembered the captors who had raped her, and seriously considered killing the Miss Jebeen the Second. But she decided to give the baby up at Jantar Mantar, seeing many good people there. She ends the letter by sharing her plan to kill herself rather than suffer and struggle more. After finishing the letter, Anjum decides they should have a funeral for Revathy as well, and “want[s] to know what the correct rituals [are] for the funeral of a communist.” The next day, Dr. Azad Bhartiya arrives at the funeral home with a red flag, in which they wrap Revathy’s letter and, singing the Hindi version of “The Internationale,” bury. From that day forward, Miss Jebeen the Second is known as Miss Udaya Jebeen.

In introducing a character from another ethnic group and political background, Roy exposes readers to the great diversity of political movements and ethnic backgrounds in India. This contributes to the novel’s overall message of the importance of inclusivity.



Here, Roy establishes the Communist Party in India as a movement that, like the Kashmir resistance, is subject to heavy and unjust persecution from the government. In spite of Biplab’s insistence that India is a democracy, Revathy’s experience of being tortured and raped simply for her political beliefs and involvement suggests that India is not a true democracy. The novel suggests that the nation lacks the tolerance and respect for human rights necessary to qualify as democracy.



Anjum’s endearing belief that a communist would have specific funeral rituals reflects, in an odd way, her respect for Revathy’s life work. Revathy’s dedication to communism is such that Anjum assumes it operates like a religion. The characters’ desire to celebrate Revathy’s life reflects their respect for political difference and for those who fight for social justice. Although Revathy has decided to end her own life, her decision not to kill Miss Jebeen the Second suggests that she has at least enough hope for the future to believe that a better world is possible for her baby.



CHAPTER 11

Biplab never did check into the rehabilitation center he was supposed to attend, but he has gotten sober. Nonetheless, his wife has left him, and his daughters won't speak with him. He lives the life "of a recluse," "binge-reading" instead of returning to alcohol. Specifically, his reading is all of the documentation Tilo has left behind in her old apartment, where he now lives. After reading so much about the Kashmir conflict, the bureaucrat has changed his mind about the whole thing, although no one knows about his opinion. If he "came out" as pro-Kashmir, he thinks, he could create a political storm, for after years of peace, Kashmir has "exploded again." But this insurgency is different from those of the past. Ordinary people rather than militants are attacking the Indian Army. Children are throwing stones at tanks.

Through his reading, Biplab has discovered that Musa has been active in the resistance, and is thrilled when one day, he hears the key turn in the lock and Musa walks into the apartment. He and Musa's meeting is tense at first, but soon the two men relax and get to talking politics, with Biplab eager to convince Musa that he is "no longer the enemy." Biplab admits to having taken Musa's documents from the freezer, but offers to let Tilo pick them up whenever Musa wants them.

After chatting for a while, Biplab asks Musa what he is dying to know: why he and Tilo had so many documents about Major Amrik Singh. "Did you kill Amrik Singh?" he asks Musa point blank. To this, Musa replies that Amrik's address had become public when he was arrested in California for assaulting his wife. After that, other Kashmiris who had asylum in California read the news, and began to turn up everywhere he went. Coming face-to-face with the mass suffering he had wrought caused the major to kill himself. Like Major Singh, Musa tells Biplab, Kashmir will one day call all of India to "self-destruct."

Biplab's change of heart suggests that he has recognized the extent to which the Indian government's violence in the Kashmir region is wrong and unjust. The nature of the Kashmiri rebellions that are occurring in the current moment is vastly different from the violent militant insurgences of the past. That ordinary people would have the courage to stand up to soldiers suggests that the Kashmiri people have become even more resilient over the course of the years, even in the face of increasing violence.



The two men's reconciliation after so many years suggests that collaboration between people of different backgrounds is possible. While Biplab may be overeager in trying to prove himself to Musa, the fact that he, a wealthy Brahmin, is willing to side with the oppressed suggests that greater unity between castes and regions of India is possible.



Major Amrik Singh, it seems, went through a similar crisis of consciousness as Biplab. Both seem to have recognized that their actions on behalf of the government were wrong, but, perhaps because Major Amrik Singh's cruelties were so extreme, when he realized how many lives he has destroyed, he couldn't handle it. The fact that he killed himself suggests the inevitability of good winning over evil; although the Indian Army has killed millions of Kashmiris, the resilience and continued survival of the Kashmiri people will force them to live with what they have done. And, if Major Amrik Singh is any example, it's possible that the Indian Army will not be able to live with it and will be forced to discontinue the cruelty.



CHAPTER 12

Musa is at Jannat Guest House for his third and final night. It is his and Tilo's last time together—in the morning, he will go to Kashmir, and he will never return. He and Tilo lie in bed, reading poetry to one another. Tilo shows him one poem that she wants to be an epitaph. It reads: "How / to tell / a / shattered / story? / By / slowly / becoming / everybody. / No. / By slowly becoming everything."

The poem Tilo reads is an accurate description of Roy's novel itself. Through deeply exploring the consciousness of characters from a whole range of backgrounds, religious and political beliefs, and personalities, Roy has slowly become everybody and everything, and has told the "shattered story" of modern politics in India.



That night, Anjum is too restless to sleep. She decides to go for a walk and takes Miss Jebeen the Second with her. As they pass the main road, the child needs to go pee and, when she's done, "lift[s] her bottom to marvel at the night sky and the stars and the one-thousand-year-old city reflected in the puddle she [has] made." Mother and daughter go back and go to sleep, like everyone else. Everyone except Guih Kyom the dung beetle, who is "on duty" lying on his back to catch the sky in case it falls. But he knows that everything "would turn all right in the end [...] because they had to. Because Miss Jebeen, Miss Udaya Jebeen, [is] come."

Miss Jebeen the Second here appears as a clear representation of resilience and hope for the future. Although she was born in the most violent of circumstances, she is a thriving young child surrounded by loving caretakers. Roy's metaphors of waste in this section further the message of resilience. Miss Jebeen the Second sees the beauty of the city in the puddle of her own pee, or waste. Similarly, the dung beetle's function is to eat solid waste and digest it. In both examples, waste becomes transformed—into beauty in Miss Jebeen's case, and into life in the case of the dung beetle.





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