



Ecocriticism and Urban Decay: The Role of Spaces in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

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Abstract

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) intricately weaves urban and natural spaces—graveyards, old cities, and protest sites—into a narrative that reflects resilience, decay, and resistance in contemporary India. This paper employs Ecocriticism to argue that Roy presents these spaces as dynamic agents, countering urban decay while critiquing the environmental and social costs of postcolonial modernity. Drawing on Lawrence Buell's ecocritical framework, Rob Nixon's slow violence, and Jane Bennett's vital materialism, I analyze how the graveyard becomes a sanctuary, Old Delhi a site of historical entropy, and protest sites a nexus of defiance. Set against India's rapid urbanization and political upheaval, these spaces challenge anthropocentric narratives, embodying both ecological loss and human endurance. This study positions *The Ministry* as a vital ecocritical text, illuminating the symbiotic relationship between degraded landscapes and marginalized communities in South Asia's urban sprawl.

Introduction

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* unfolds across India's fractured landscapes, where urban decay and human resilience converge in spaces like graveyards, old cities, and protest sites. The novel follows Anjum, a hijra who transforms a graveyard into Jannat Guest House, and Tilo, entangled in Kashmir's insurgency and Delhi's unrest, weaving their stories through environments marked by neglect and resistance (Roy 135, 389). In a nation grappling with post-1991 liberalization and environmental degradation, Roy's spaces are not passive backdrops but active participants in the narrative.

Ecocriticism, which examines the interplay between literature and the environment, offers a lens to unpack these settings. Roy's portrayal aligns with South Asia's urban reality—overcrowded cities, polluted rivers, and shrinking green spaces—while challenging the anthropocentric bias of modernity. This paper argues that graveyards, Old Delhi, and protest sites symbolize resilience amid decay and resistance to systemic erasure. Using Lawrence Buell's ecocritical principles, Rob Nixon's slow violence, and Jane Bennett's vital materialism,



I explore how Roy reimagines urban spaces as ecological and social battlegrounds, contributing to a growing corpus of ecocritical literature in the Global South.

Theoretical Framework: Ecocriticism, Slow Violence, and Vital Materialism

Lawrence Buell's Ecocriticism emphasizes the environment's narrative role, advocating for texts where "human accountability to the environment is part of the ethical orientation" (7). In *The Ministry*, spaces reflect this accountability, shaped by human action yet asserting their own agency. Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence—gradual, often invisible environmental harm—frames India's urban decay as a legacy of colonialism and neoliberalism, disproportionately affecting the marginalized (2). Jane Bennett's vital materialism posits that nonhuman entities—objects, landscapes—possess vibrancy, influencing human life (16). Together, these theories illuminate Roy's spaces as sites of ecological critique and resilience.

India's urbanization—Delhi's population surged from 9.4 million in 1991 to over 16 million by 2011—exacerbates environmental strain, a context Roy exploits to highlight decay and resistance (Census of India). This framework guides the analysis, situating *The Ministry* within ecocritical discourses on urban South Asia.

The Graveyard as Sanctuary: Resilience amid Decay

The graveyard in *The Ministry* emerges as a paradoxical space of life amid death, symbolizing resilience against urban decay. Anjum, after surviving the 2002 Gujarat riots, rejects the Khwabgah's confines for a Delhi graveyard, where she builds Jannat Guest House (Roy 135). Roy describes it as "a place where the world's refuse found a home," transforming a site of abandonment into a sanctuary for outcasts—drug addicts, orphans, and the bereaved (440). This act aligns with Buell's ecocritical ethos, where human and nonhuman interdependence counters environmental neglect (92).

Nixon's slow violence frames the graveyard's decay as a byproduct of urban sprawl—encroaching concrete, polluted air—yet Anjum's intervention resists this erasure. She plants flowers, tends graves, and constructs makeshift shelters, embodying Bennett's vital materialism: the graveyard's stones and soil "act" alongside her, fostering a vibrant community (Roy 139). Roy writes, "The dead were her neighbors now," blurring human-nonhuman boundaries (136). This symbiosis critiques Delhi's sanitized modernity, where green spaces vanish under development, as noted by Ghosh in his ecocritical study of Indian cities (45).



In South Asian literature, graveyards often signify loss—think of Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines*—but Roy reimagines them as sites of renewal. Jannat’s resilience mirrors the hijra community’s endurance, challenging anthropocentric urban narratives with an ecological alternative rooted in decay’s potential.

Old Delhi: Historical Entropy and Cultural Resistance

Old Delhi, with its crumbling havelis and crowded lanes, embodies urban decay as historical entropy, yet also resistance to homogenization. Anjum’s early life unfolds in the Khwabgah, a “House of Dreams” amidst Shahjahanabad’s decay, where “walls leaned like tired old men” (Roy 26). Roy juxtaposes this with modern Delhi’s malls and flyovers, critiquing the erasure of precolonial landscapes under neoliberal progress (Roy 45). The old city’s decay—polluted Yamuna, vanishing trees—reflects Nixon’s slow violence, a gradual degradation tied to colonial urban planning and postcolonial neglect (11).

Buell’s framework highlights Old Delhi’s ethical role: its persistence demands accountability to history and ecology, resisting the “placelessness” of new urbanity (63). The Khwabgah’s rituals—singing, storytelling—assert cultural vibrancy, aligning with Bennett’s vital materialism: the crumbling walls and dusty streets “vibrate” with memory, shaping Anjum’s identity (17). Roy notes, “The city held her, even as it fell apart,” suggesting a mutual agency between space and inhabitant (28).

This portrayal echoes ecocritical themes in South Asian fiction, like Anita Desai’s *Clear Light of Day*, where old cities resist modernity’s amnesia. Roy’s Old Delhi critiques India’s developmental narrative, its decay a testament to resilience amid loss, offering a counterpoint to sanitized urban ideals.

Protest Sites: Nexus of Defiance and Ecological Critique

Protest sites in *The Ministry*—notably Jantar Mantar and Kashmir’s streets—symbolize resistance, intertwining human defiance with ecological commentary. Tilo’s narrative intersects with these spaces: at Jantar Mantar, she adopts Miss Jebeen Second during an anti-corruption rally, while Kashmir’s ravaged landscapes frame her bond with Musa (Roy 389, 412). Roy describes Jantar Mantar as “a carnival of despair,” littered with banners and bodies, its chaos reflecting urban overload (367). Kashmir’s “orchards turned to graveyards” critique militarized decay (Roy 298).



Nixon's slow violence illuminates these sites: Delhi's polluted air and Kashmir's deforested hills embody environmental harm compounded by political strife (13). Buell's ecocriticism positions them as ethical spaces, where human struggles—against corruption, occupation—mirror ecological ones (84). Bennett's vital materialism emerges in the agency of objects: protest signs, bullet-scarred trees, and Tilo's sketches assert a "thing-power" that amplifies resistance (20). Roy writes, "The stones cried out," giving voice to a wounded landscape (301).

In South Asian literature, protest sites often fuse politics and place—Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown* shares this—but Roy's ecocritical lens foregrounds ecological decay as inseparable from social injustice. Jantar Mantar and Kashmir resist urban and national hegemonies, their vibrancy a call to reimagine human-environment relations.

Conclusion

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness reconfigures urban spaces—graveyards, Old Delhi, and protest sites—as symbols of resilience, decay, and resistance, offering an ecocritical critique of contemporary India. The graveyard, transformed by Anjum into Jannat, counters decay with communal vitality, embodying Buell's human-nonhuman ethic. Old Delhi's entropy resists modern erasure, its vibrancy per Bennett a testament to cultural endurance. Protest sites, marked by Nixon's slow violence, fuse ecological and political defiance, challenging anthropocentric narratives.

Roy's novel aligns with South Asian ecocritical literature—Ghosh, Desai—yet stands out for its focus on marginalized agency within degraded spaces. Set against India's urbanization and political turmoil, these landscapes mirror the resilience of communities like hijras and Kashmiris, critiquing a modernity that sacrifices ecology for progress. *The Ministry* thus emerges as a vital text, illuminating the symbiotic dance between urban decay and human resistance, urging a revaluation of space in literature and life.



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