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Croning the Colony: Menopause, Necro-Reproductive Politics, and the Feminist Counter-Archive in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

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Abstract: Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) portrays contemporary India's intersecting crises of religious nationalism, caste violence, and militarized occupation through a polyphonic narrative centered on marginalized bodies. While existing scholarship emphasizes hijra identity, queer kinship, and urban necropolitics, the novel's engagement with aging, post-fertility, and menopause remains underexplored. This article introduces "croning the colony" as an original theoretical framework to examine how Roy reframes post-menopausal and post-fertile bodies—particularly Anjum and elder figures at Jannat Guest House—as agents of necro-reproductive resistance and feminist counter-archiving. Employing close textual analysis grounded in direct engagement with Roy's novel, the study synthesizes Achille Mbembe's necropolitics, María Lugones's coloniality of gender, Sylvia Wynter's critique of the overrepresentation of Man, and feminist crone reclamation. It integrates New Historicist and cultural-political approaches to systemless authoritarianism and counter-archives. Roy constructs the graveyard as a living counter-archive where post-reproductive bodies disrupt colonial-modern reproductive mandates, transforming death-worlds into spaces of plural, embodied witnessing and alternative kinship. Menopause emerges not as decay but as generative epistemology enabling mehfil gatherings, grave-keeping, and cyclical futurity, exemplified in the dung-beetle denouement. Croning the colony advances postcolonial feminist literary studies by linking aging embodiment to decolonial resistance, offering a blueprint for reading reproductive endings across global South narratives and challenging Man's overrepresentation through post-fertile plurality.

Keywords: Croning, Hijra, Necro-Reproductive Politics, Post-Menopausal Bodies, Decolonial Feminism, Necropolitics.

Introduction

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) unfolds as a sprawling narrative that maps the fractures of contemporary India: Hindutva nationalism, caste atrocities, the Gujarat pogroms, Kashmir's militarized occupation, and the precarious survival of the dispossessed. The novel opens with Anjum's resonant declaration: "I'm a mehfil, I'm a gathering. Of everybody and nobody, of everything and nothing" (Roy 3). This collective identity materializes in Jannat Guest House, a Mughal-era graveyard transformed into a multispecies commune sheltering hijras, Dalits, Adivasis, Kashmiris, abandoned infants, and the politically disappeared. Anjum, born intersex as Aftab and surgically transitioned, ages across the narrative into a post-fertile elder matriarch of this necropolis. Scholarly engagement with the novel has illuminated transgender resistance and hijra kinship, perturbatory narration and queer necropolitics, questions of realism amid "too much blood," and resilience amid systemic marginalization. However, the deliberate foregrounding of aging, post-fertile bodies—Anjum's transition into elderhood, post-maternal women, and male crone-like figures such as Saddam Hussein—has received scant attention. This article addresses that lacuna by theorizing "croning the colony" as a decolonial feminist strategy. Croning reclaims the post-menopausal phase of the crone archetype as a site of wisdom, autonomy, communal stewardship, and epistemic authority, liberated from biopolitical reproductive mandates. In Roy's text, this strategy intersects with necro-reproductive politics to generate a feminist counter-archive that resists colonial-modern regimes of fertility, death, and futurity.

The framework synthesizes Mbembe's death-worlds with Lugones's coloniality of gender and Wynter's critique of Man's overrepresentation. It reads the graveyard not merely as a queer utopia but as a crone-led space of necro-reproductive resistance, where post-fertile bodies repurpose waste and erasure into plural, embodied witnessing. Through rigorous close readings of key scenes—the mehfil gatherings, Gujarat pogrom aftermath, gravestone labor, Imam's prayers, and dung-beetle closure—this analysis demonstrates how Roy reframes menopause as generative epistemology rather than decay.

Necro-Reproductive Politics and the Croning Body

Achille Mbembe's necro politics conceptualizes sovereignty as the power to dictate who may live and who must die, producing "death-worlds" in which populations are reduced to "living dead" conditions. In postcolonial India, this operates through system less authoritarianism—diffused power embedded in cultural norms, surveillance, and unofficial violence rather than centralized decree. Gender, however, remains undertheorized in Mbembe's formulation. Necro-reproductive politics extends the concept to encompass the governance of fertility, kinship, lineage, and grievability, rendering post-menopausal and post-fertile bodies socially surplus while biologically alive.

María Lugones's coloniality of gender reveals gender as a violent colonial imposition that destroyed Indigenous cosmologies while enforcing a binary, heterosexual system for racial and class reproduction. Non-white bodies were animalized or reduced to reproductive labor; post-fertile bodies thus emerge as un-metabolizable excesses, sites of epistemic and ontological disruption within the colonial-modern gender system.

Sylvia Wynter critiques the overrepresentation of Man—the Western bourgeois, biocentric, reproductive subject—as if it constituted the universal human. Periodizing its emergence from religious to secular forms, Wynter identifies postcolonial, post-fertile subjects as liminal figures capable of conjugating alternative imaginaries that unsettle coloniality of being toward a more planetary humanism. The crone archetype, reclaimed in feminist thought as a figure of intuition, cyclical wisdom, and communal preservation, embodies this refusal: queer to Man's linear regeneration, preservative against necropolitical erasure, and archival in the face of official forgetting. In Roy's novel, the untranslated Urdu mehfil—a celebratory Sufi gathering—functions as the crone's epistemic laboratory, where post-reproductive bodies enact necro-reproductive counter-archiving.

Anjum as Post-Menopausal Croning Protagonist

Anjum's origins expose the violence of colonial gender binaries. Born intersex in an Old Delhi household where "all things, not just living things...carpets, clothes, books, pens, musical instruments...[have] a gender" (Roy), she encounters linguistic and medical normalization. In the Khwabgah (House of Dreams), reproductive longing surfaces intensely, yet non-biological mothering of Zainab transforms her body into a "generous host instead of a battlefield." This moment exceeds standard reproductive feminism, gesturing toward alternative kinship.

The 2002 Gujarat pogrom serves as the structural pivot. Witnessing and surviving horrific violence, Anjum returns traumatized and largely silent. She leaves the Khwabgah and claims the graveyard, constructing rooms over graves precisely as she transitions into post-fertile elderhood. This migration—frequently interpreted as queer-utopian world-making—is reread here as “menopaustic”: a deliberate entry into the social death assigned by necro power, from which she forges a mehfil of post-productive subjects. Jannat Guest House and Funeral Services converts literal waste land and bones into gritty paradise, a space of “utmost happiness” forged in vulnerability and care.

Grief becomes menstrual-mourning. When Anjum rewrites her Partition-era “flyover story” to soothe her adopted daughter Zainab, she edits personal trauma unburdened by reproductive futurity, producing a simpler, happier counter-memory. The graveyard’s double function as funeral parlor directly counters Kashmir’s unrecorded deaths and denied rites, positioning the post-fertile body as an epistemic instrument for the un-grievable.

Necro-Reproductive Knowledge Production

Jannat provides “a steady supply of gravestones,” materializing memory where the state produces erasure. Post-fertile and elder bodies actively claim physical and archival space. The blind Imam, himself post-productive and family-less, offers prayers over unclaimed dead refused by the wider duniya. His liturgical labor audibilizes the counter-archive, sacralizing what necropolitics discards. Mulaqat Ali’s mother, post-maternal in the fullest sense, receives silenced Kashmiri histories in her body, embodying corporeal memory-density.

The novel’s polyphonic, non-linear form mirrors this living archive: shifting perspectives, documentary fragments (notebooks, letters), gossip, songs, and multispecies elements (birds, bats, animals) resist singular authority and anthropocentrism. This literary strategy performs witnessing against systemless authoritarianism, privileging minor voices through embodied, oral, and spatial practices that sustain what official histories omit.

Male Croning, Foundlings, and the Refusal of Reproductive Futurity

Roy’s counter-archive transcends biological sex and gender. Saddam Hussein, a Dalit convert who witnessed his father’s lynching, adopts a defiant name and devotes himself to carving gravestones with post-vengeful care. Obsolete to colonial-masculine futurity, he enacts male croning: bodies pushed outside reproductive mandates become stewards of the dead and collective memory.

The founding Miss Udaya Jabeen the Second—born of a Maoist Adivasi guerrilla’s gang-rape, kidnapped amid protest, and inscribed through gravestones rather than birth certificates—epitomizes necro-reproductive reclamation. Raised by post-fertile women (Anjum and Tilo), she inaugurates a queer matrilineage unbound by biopolitical lineage. The novel closes with Guih Kyom the dung-beetle, lying on its back with legs cycling “to save the world in case the heavens fell...But even he knew that things would turn out all right in the end” (Roy). This ecological, cyclical reversal—preservative rather than progressive—affirms Wynterian plurality over Man’s reproductive futurism, embodying crone epistemology in nonhuman form.

The Ministry and Broader Counter-Archival Challenges

Roy dialogues with but extends Saadat Hasan Manto’s Partition archives by infusing postmenopausal croning into scenes of institutional and communal death. Unlike much Western menopause literary criticism, which often centers individual aging in Euro-American contexts, Roy situates post-fertile bodies within postcolonial death-worlds, where they perform activist witnessing and repair. Crone consciousness—wisdom, intuition, and communal stewardship—disrupts epistemic injustices, claiming authority amid rising authoritarianism and offering a model of happiness as collective archival care. This reading broadens analyses of the novel’s necropolis aesthetic by adding sustained corporeal and decolonial dimensions, contributing to global South feminist literary studies.

Conclusion

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Arundhati Roy cronifies the colony by centering post-menopausal and non-reproductive bodies as central agents of resistance within necro-reproductive death-worlds. The graveyard counter-archive testifies to feminist, queer, and decolonial world-making, where menopause functions as generative epistemology rather than endpoint. By synthesizing necro politics, coloniality of gender, and Wynter’s humanism through embodied practice, the novel displaces dominant scholarly foci on reproduction and surrogacy while advancing postcolonial feminist inquiry into aging and reproductive endings.

Croning the colony thus provides a blueprint for reading across contemporary global South narratives, urging comparative work with authors such as Edwidge Danticat, Kamila Shamsie, and regional-language writers. In an era of diffused power and demographic anxieties, Roy’s vision affirms that utmost happiness emerges not from mandated reproduction or state immortality, but from defiant, plural, archival care in the face of necropolitical odds.

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