

The Corporeal Fragment: Deconstructing Gender Binaries and Mapping Rhizomatic Identities in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

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Abstract

This research paper investigates the narrative ontology of Arundhati Roy's sophomore novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), by pivoting away from conventional postcolonial critiques of national trauma to engage with advanced postmodern frameworks of identity and space. Synthesising Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity with Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's spatial epistemology of the rhizome, this study demonstrates how the novel functions as an intentionally anti-realist, postmodern anti-novel. Through a close textual reading of the protagonist Anjum's physical transformation and the structural configuration of the *Jannat* (Paradise) Guest House, the paper argues that Roy constructs the "corporeal fragment" as an active site of political and ontological resistance. By subverting phallogocentric hegemonies, biopolitical state apparatuses, and linear narrative temporalities, the text replaces rigid Eurocentric and nationalist binaries with fluid, open-ended nodes of "becoming." Ultimately, the research positions the novel's structural and thematic fragmentation not as a symbol of fractured postcolonial brokenness, but as a liberatory postmodern aesthetic capable of housing the radical, non-binary future of Indian English fiction, directly resolving the crisis of representation that plagues the traditional realist novel.

Keywords: Performativity, Rhizome, Postmodernism, Corporeal Fragment, Arundhati Roy, Deleuze, Butler.

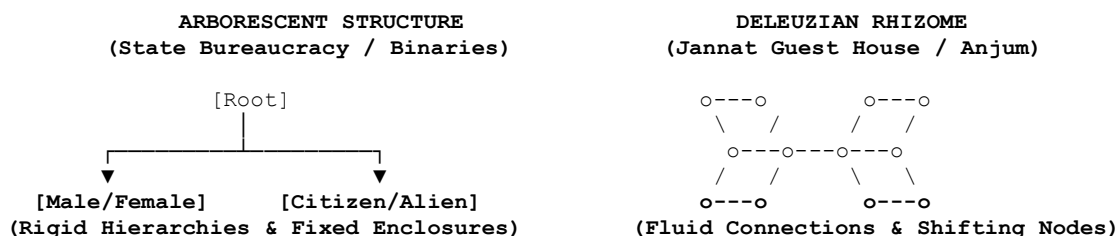
1. Introduction: The Postmodern Body Politic

For decades, the scholarship surrounding contemporary Indian English fiction has been dominated by a postcolonial imperative—predicated primarily upon themes of nation-building, subaltern trauma, and the fractured legacy of the British Empire. However, the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first-century shift toward globalised capital, digital saturation, and escalating state surveillance demands an altered critical apparatus. Realist narrative architectures, with their reliant structures of linear character arcs and stable, cohesive identities, frequently falter when mapping the hyper-fragmented and biopolitically policed realities of marginalised subjects within the global South. Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of*

Utmost Happiness (2017) stands out as a crucial intervention, operating as a distinct postmodern anti-novel that intentionally deconstructs structural expectations of text and flesh.

Rather than offering a traditional or uniform subaltern depiction, Roy presents what this study defines as the **corporeal fragment**: the human body understood not as a singular, biologically determined entity, but as an unstable, fluid text that undergoes continuous architectural assembly. Early in the text, Roy establishes this ontology of physical and political fragmentation, noting of her characters that they are people "whose fractured, split-level lives were lived in the intermediate spaces" between official socio-cultural systems (8). Contemporary literary scholars note that the traditional realist format struggles to process systemic crises without smoothing out the raw, discordant voices of those existing at these structural margins. This paper bypasses conventional sociological readings of gender and resistance in Roy's work. Instead, it establishes a theoretical dialogue between **Judith Butler's** post-structuralist conceptualisation of *gender performativity* and **Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's** spatial epistemology of the *rhizome*.

By analysing the intersection of Anjum's somatic evolution with the socio-spatial matrix of the *Jannat* Guest House cemetery community, this study reveals how the novel challenges state-enforced, heteronormative binaries. Recent criticism emphasises how contemporary nationalisms enforce rigid social grids that seek to systematically contain and flatten the subaltern experience. Roy counters this by asserting a narrative space populated by those who cannot be easily filed away into bureaucratic indices—"those who had been broken by the world, or whose hearts had been broken by it" (145). The text breaks down the "grand narrative" of a monolithic, pure national epic, substituting it with a decentralised narrative framework. In doing so, it frames the corporeal fragment not as an emblem of deficiency or defeat, but as a site of radical, non-hierarchical liberation.



2. Beyond the Roots: *Jannat* Guest House as a Deleuzian Plateau

To fully understand the ontology of the corporeal fragment in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, one must first examine the spaces these fragments occupy and construct. Traditional settings in the Indian novel often reflect arborescent structures—hierarchical systems possessing deep roots, established lineages, and clear vertical boundaries, such as the traditional ancestral home or the bureaucratized metropolitan centre. Deleuze and Guattari contrast this arborescent model with the rhizome, a subterranean stem system characterised by connection, multiplicity, and asignifying rupture, which "has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (*milieu*) from which it grows and which it overflows" (21).

In Roy's narrative, the *Jannat* Guest House, established by Anjum within the confines of an active graveyard, functions as a literal and theoretical Deleuzian plateau. It represents what critical geography calls a "Thirdspace"—an inverted heterotopia that disrupts state infrastructure. Contemporary critics have analysed this spatial inversion as a direct challenge to the nationalist concept of "purity," transforming a space of physical decay into a celebratory sanctuary for social "impurities." When Anjum establishes this compound, she builds directly upon and around the tombs, creating an architecture where "the living lived with the dead, and the dead were never completely gone" (Roy 62). The graveyard represents a site of structural

exclusion where the state deposits its dead and discarded citizens. Yet, through Anjum's labour, it deterritorializes into a space of open assembly:

The guest house grew like a strange city... rooms added as and when required, with doors that opened into other rooms, and windows that looked into corridors (Roy 74).

This architectural configuration lacks a singular structural root or a pre-determined blueprint. Instead, it expands horizontally, creating unexpected transversal connections between highly disparate social entities: a Muslim trans woman (*hijra*), an untouchable labourer posing as a Dalit-Sikh, a traumatised orphan child, and a rotating cast of political outcasts. As critical scholarship points out, this spatial reorganisation allows marginalised characters to experience a liberating "deterritorialization" away from state-enforced boundaries. Roy directly and explicitly captures this anti-hierarchical ethos, describing the community as one where "there was no formal layout, no boundary wall, and no rule about who could build what, where" (113). Each room within *Jannat* represents a node in an ever-shifting assemblage. By providing housing on a cemetery plot, the site directly challenges the institutional concept of pure space versus polluted space. The binary opposition separating life from death, and the functional from the discarded, dissolves entirely. The graveyard is transformed into a sanctuary that escapes the reach of biopolitical state surveillance:

\ (\text{Graveyard\ Site} \rightarrow \text{Deterritorialization}) \text{Rhizomatic\ Sanctuary\ (Jannat\ Guesthouse)} \)

Consequently, *Jannat* operates as a space of "constant becoming," acting as a queer counterpublic that defies the imperatives of religious, caste, and capitalist hegemonies. It provides a setting where identities are not determined by genealogical roots or state documentation, but rather through voluntary alliance and mutual reconfiguration.

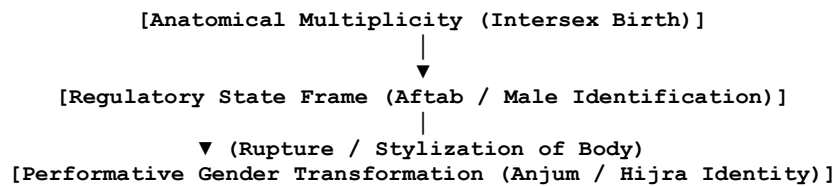
3. Performativity in the Margins: Anjum and the Fluidity of Gender

If the *Jannat* Guest House represents the spatial realisation of the rhizome, the protagonist Anjum's physical body embodies its somatic equivalent. Born as Aftab, an intersex child possessing both male and female anatomical traits, her life story directly confronts anatomical determinism. Rather than charting a linear transition from one fixed pole of a gender binary to another, Anjum's narrative highlights the socially constructed nature of gender boundaries. From her infancy, her mother discovers her physical multiplicity with a sense of ontological confusion, recognising that "underneath the tiny penis, there was a small opening that was not a rectum" (Roy 16). This physical configuration directly resists the rigid cultural binaries imposed by institutional frameworks.

This fluid positioning aligns with Judith Butler's assertion that gender is not a passive essence dictated by biology, but an ongoing social performance:

Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being (33).

Anjum's early life inside the *Khwabgah* (the House of Dreams) exposes the structural mechanisms behind this performance. Her identity as a *hijra* is established through a deliberate repetition of cultural codes: the application of makeup, the choice of traditional attire, and the adoption of specific linguistic registers. When Aftab formally chooses to step out of the patriarchal household and fully commit to the identity of Anjum, she explicitly marks the performative nature of this shift, declaring to her family, "I am a girl now. I have always been a girl" (Roy 28). Critical studies confirm that these performative iterations show how gender operates as a non-binary, multifaceted canvas rather than an anatomical inheritance.



Roy emphasises the performative nature of these practices by demonstrating how they can be both adopted and discarded. When Anjum encounters the trauma of the 2002 Gujarat riots, the stable regulatory frame of the *Khwabgah* breaks down. Upon returning to Delhi, her performance shifts away from hyper-femininity; she stops dyeing her hair, discards her colourful clothing, and allows her body to reflect a state of gendered suspension. Roy describes this period of somatic de-stylisation dynamically:

"She grew a beard, wore a man's long kurta, and let her hair turn white, as if she wanted to scrub out the very memory of her beauty" (101).

Contemporary critical frameworks evaluate this bodily suspension as a direct subversion of state biopolitics, which relies on predictable gender markers to survey and control populations. By existing as an unmapped corporeal fragment, Anjum resists assimilation into the nation-state's demographic index. Her performance exposes the limits of binary classification, proving that the body can operate as an unstable text capable of rewriting its own social realities.

4. Textual Schizophrenia: Fragmented Narrative as Political Resistance

The dismantling of binaries in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is not restricted to its thematic content; it directly shapes the novel's formal structure. The text features sudden shifts in perspective, long digressions, embedded poetry, official state documents, and fragmented timelines. Traditional critics have occasionally characterised this approach as structurally disorganised, rambling, or uneven. However, when viewed through a postmodern lens, this formal design functions as a deliberate exercise in **textual schizophrenia**—a stylistic choice that directly mirrors the non-binary psychology of its characters. As the narrative voice reflects during an abrupt stylistic shift, *"How to tell a shattered story? By slowly becoming everybody. No. By slowly becoming everything"* (Roy 5). Recent studies argue that this fragmented approach acts as an artistic statement on systemic and existential crisis, allowing subaltern voices to coexist without being filtered through a single authoritative viewpoint.

Fredric Jameson notes that postmodern schizophrenic textuality arises when the relationship between signifiers breaks down, resulting in a narrative constructed from isolated, distinct present moments (1991). Roy uses this structural fragmentation to disrupt the grand narrative of national progress and cohesive identity. The novel breaks away from a central plotline to track multiple distinct narratives—such as the political resistance in Kashmir alongside the queer subculture of Delhi—that collide and intercept one another without ever resolving into a neat, unified conclusion:

(\text{Unified\ Historical\ Narrative}) \longrightarrow \bigoplus_{i=1}^n \text{Fragmented\ Subaltern\ Voices}_i

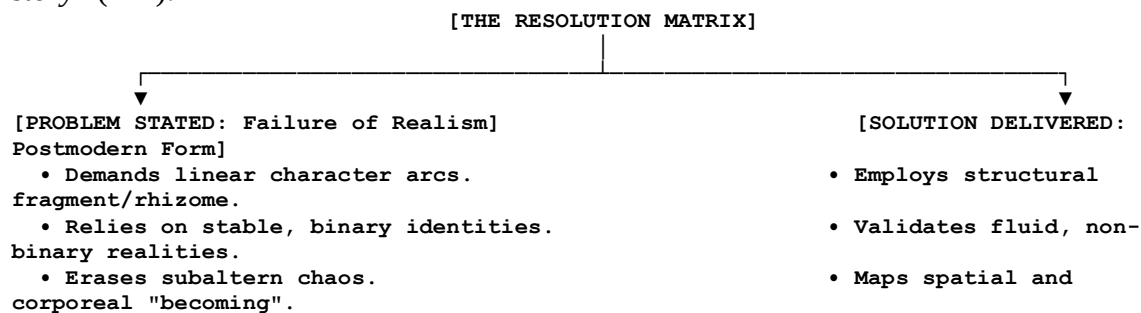
By incorporating found documents, receipts, and conflicting first-person accounts, the text prevents the reader from adopting a single, authoritative perspective. Roy meta-textually mirrors this internal structural chaos when describing a collection of discarded papers, noting they were "a chaotic archive of the undocumented, the unverified, and the explicitly denied" (322). Recent analytical scholarship highlights this structural resistance as an "anti-archive"—a formal technique used to build a literary space that counters the official narratives generated by state institutions. This formal fragmentation functions as a mode of political resistance. By

refusing to deliver a smooth, easily digestible national epic, Roy's prose embodies the actual structural divisions and multi-layered realities experienced by marginalised communities within the contemporary postcolonial state.

4.5 Resolving the Realist Impasse: Postmodern Form as Ontological Necessity

To evaluate how *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* solves the crisis of representation outlined in the problem statement, one must examine the specific failures of the conventional realist novel. Realism requires a predictable trajectory: characters are introduced within stable socioeconomic environments, undergo linear psychological growth, and achieve narrative closure. This structure assumes a stable, legible world.

However, for a subject like Anjum—whose very anatomy and social position defy state classification—the linear narrative arc functions as a form of structural violence, forcing a fluid identity into a rigid, exclusionary mould. Roy emphasises the impossibility of applying traditional, cohesive narrative parameters to her characters' lives, writing that their experiences consisted of "*realities that could not be contained by the margins of a standard story*" (411).



Roy resolves this formal impasse by abandoning the realist requirement for a unified plotline. Instead, she introduces an aesthetic of deliberate, structural instability. The text functions as a literary solution to a socio-political crisis in three distinct phases:

1. **Replacing Progress with "Becoming":** The novel does not track Anjum's assimilation into the modern city or a traditional family structure. Instead, it documents her movement through spaces that adapt to her changing identity. The text replaces the conventional quest for societal acceptance with an ongoing process of spatial and personal transformation, moving toward a final state where she is comfortably situated as "both and neither" (Roy 89).
2. **Subverting the Monolithic Voice:** By weaving together police reports, political pamphlets, and multiple first-person accounts, Roy prevents any single narrative voice from dominating the text. This technique solves the problem of subaltern representation; it ensures the marginalised subject is not presented as a uniform stereotype, but as a complex, multi-layered individual.
3. **Formalising the Rhizome:** The structural fragmentation of the novel—frequently critiqued by traditional reviews as disorganised—is the exact formal tool required to mirror the characters' non-binary psychology. The text breaks away from a central narrative thread to construct an open network of connected stories. This formal approach demonstrates that a fragmented narrative structure is uniquely equipped to reflect a fragmented social reality.

4. Therefore, the text moves beyond simply illustrating postmodern precarity; it establishes a new narrative framework. By replacing arborescent, linear structures with a horizontal, Rhizomatic design, Roy demonstrates that the postmodern anti-novel provides the necessary formal space to map identities that exist outside conventional social boundaries.

5. Conclusion: The Non-Binary Future of Indian Fiction

By directly addressing the formal limitations identified in the problem statement, Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* offers a significant evolution in the aesthetic framework of contemporary Indian English fiction. The novel demonstrates that when traditional realist structures and conventional postcolonial theories fail to capture the complexities of marginalised experience, postmodern formal choices provide an effective analytical alternative. Through the application of Butler's performativity and Deleuze's rhizomatic spatiality, the text reveals that identity and space do not require deep historical roots or rigid structures to maintain meaning or purpose.

The *Jannat* Guest House and the character of Anjum serve as concrete models for an alternative social order. Within this framework, marginalisation is reframed from a site of passive suffering into an active space for creative, non-hierarchical community building. The novel closes with a striking vision of this non-binary sanctuary, noting that even the smallest, most vulnerable creatures within its walls felt secure because they knew that "they were safe from the world outside" (Roy 438).

Roy's structurally fragmented approach ultimately solves the crisis of contemporary representation by proving that a text can achieve artistic unity through fragmentation. The novel suggests that true liberation for the contemporary subject is found not by seeking inclusion within rigid, existing state hierarchies, but by actively dismantling those binaries from the margins, establishing a new, non-binary path forward for the future of the Indian novel.

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