

# Transgender People's Deterritorialization in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* and Trace Peterson's "After Before and After"

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## Abstract

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* and Trace Peterson's "After Before and After" have been studied in several aspects related to transgender issues. The presentation of transgender people, especially the transgender protagonist in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, has been criticized as a formulaic depiction with little portrayal of their struggles and triumphs. At the same time, the transgender protagonist is viewed positively as an integral force in the novel. The poem "After Before and After" has been praised for its creative portrayal of transgender people. A study of transgender issues in relation to desire and connection helps to show that both texts offer more possibilities of liberation towards the state of "becoming." This study applies Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's theory of schizoanalysis to explore transgender people's lines of flight, rhizomatic movements and transversal connections towards the state of deterritorialization in India and the US.

## Keywords

transgender – post structuralism – becoming – deterritorialization

## บทคัดย่อ

ขบวนการเคลื่อนย้ายออกจากพื้นที่เดิมของกลุ่มคนข้ามเพศในเรื่อง *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* ของ Arundhati Roy และ “After Before and After” ของ Trace Peterson

งานวิจัยในอดีตที่ศึกษานวนิยายเรื่อง *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* ของ Arundhati Roy และบทกวี “After Before and After” ของ Trace Peterson ได้แสดงผลการวิจัยหลายแง่มุมที่เกี่ยวข้องกับกลุ่มคนข้ามเพศ การนำเสนอประเด็นกลุ่มคนข้ามเพศโดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่งตัวละครเอกซึ่งเป็นคนข้ามเพศในเรื่อง *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* ถูกวิจารณ์ในแง่ลบว่าเป็นการวาดภาพที่มีรูปแบบตายตัวซึ่งแทบไม่มีการพรรณนาถึงการดิ้นรนต่อสู้และชัยชนะ ในขณะเดียวกันตัวละครเอกซึ่งเป็นคนข้ามเพศนี้ก็ได้รับการแสดงความคิดเห็นในเชิงบวกว่าเป็นพลังที่สำคัญของนวนิยายเรื่องนี้ ส่วนบทกวี “After Before and After” ได้รับการชื่นชมว่าเขียนภาพกลุ่มคนข้ามเพศอย่างสร้างสรรค์ การศึกษาประเด็นคนข้ามเพศร่วมกับแง่มุมเรื่องความปรารถนาและความเชื่อมต่อสัมพันธ์ช่วยให้เห็นว่าตัวบททั้งสองเรื่องนำไปสู่ความเป็นไปได้ของการปลดปล่อย ให้เป็นอิสระสู่สถานะของ “การกำลังจะเกิด หรือการกำลังจะเป็น” ของสรรพสิ่ง งานวิจัยนี้ ประยุกต์ทฤษฎีการวิเคราะห์จิตเภทของ Gilles Deleuze และ Félix Guattari เพื่อศึกษาเส้นที่ตัดขนบของสังคม การเคลื่อนที่แบบเชื่อมต่อในแนวราบ และการคิดแบบตัดข้ามสู่ภาวะของการสลายบรรดา รหัสทางสังคมที่สลับซับซ้อน

## 1 Introduction

*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) is a novel by Indian writer Arundhati Roy. The transgender issue in this novel is portrayed mainly through the transgender protagonist Anjum, who is a Hijra.<sup>1</sup> When Anjum decides that she wants to become a woman, she joins the community of Hijra called “the Khwabgah,” or “the House of Dreams,” where a group of transgender people live together and strengthen their community through a historical narrative. Although “the House of Dreams” seems to be an ideal place for them, Hijras suffer from their social position as outsiders and insiders at the same time. Moreover, Hijras have suffered from people’s negative view of them, the unethical treatment of the surgeon in sex reassignment surgery, and the power struggle and conflict between old and new generation Hijras in “the House of Dreams.” Later, Anjum leaves “the House of Dreams” to live in the graveyard where she sets up the Jannat Guest House, or Paradise. The Jannat Guest House becomes the place where Anjum welcomes other Hijras who leave the rigid structural power of the established Hijra Gharanas.<sup>2</sup> With Anjum’s desire to be

1 *Hijra* is a term for transgender people (especially men who want a female identity and dress as women) in South Asia, especially in India.

2 A symbolically organized housing system which functions as an internal system of segregation within communities.

liberated from heteronormative society and the hierarchical system, she comes to live within the territory of the graveyard, where she forms connections with other Hijras.

“After Before and After” (2015) is a poem written by Trace Peterson, who is an American transwoman poet. This poem gives a more positive representation of transgender people and offers more possibilities for liberation, becoming,<sup>3</sup> and deterritorialization. The speaker in the poem is freed from the established power of the society to go beyond heteronormative limits and against civilization through a transversal line, which cuts across the normal lines with the possibilities of transversal crossing towards deterritorialization, and go away from the heteronormative lines which deprive people of happiness.

This research paper will explore the issue of transgenderism in relation to desire and connection in both texts to shed light on transgender people's experience in the process of liberation towards the state of “becoming.” This study applies Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's theory<sup>4</sup> of schizoanalysis<sup>5</sup> to explore transgender people's lines of flight<sup>6</sup> in India and America through rhizomatic<sup>7</sup> movements and transversal<sup>8</sup> connections towards the state of deterritorialization<sup>9</sup>.

## 2 Theoretical Framework

My research applies Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's theory of schizoanalysis to show the possibilities of transgender revolution through lines of flight towards a state of becoming and deterritorialization. Through a schizoanalytic approach, the socio-psychological nature of power and control can be seen. As a revolutionary political process, schizoanalysis helps schizoanalysts to rethink

3 “becoming” is referred to a process of change from the original value which brings about a new identity within the assemblage.

4 A post-structuralist approach proposed by Gilles Deleuze, a French philosopher, and Félix Guattari, a French psychoanalyst and political activist, who wrote a number of works together.

5 Schizoanalysis is a concept developed by Deleuze and Guattari based on their theory of schizophrenia and capitalism.

6 Lines of flight refer to a state of counter-movement or experimental line opposed to the existing state of affairs and an attempt to escape from established systems.

7 Rhizomatic refers to Deleuze and Guattari's philosophical concept of *rhizome*, which stands for an image of thought and multiplicities.

8 Transversal refers to a line that crosses normative lines.

9 Deterritorialization is the act or concept of leaving the established territory constructed by social, political, and cultural ideologies.

social convention, and go beyond ideological territories toward freedom. The goal of schizoanalysis is to achieve an interconnected state of all things in order to break away from tradition, which alienates people who are different from socially constructed norms. Although Deleuze and Guattari's schizoanalysis in conjunction with a postcolonial approach has been criticized by several critics especially Gayatri Spivak,<sup>10</sup> their theory is worth applying as a means of exploring a becoming-space for the subaltern.

In the essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?," Spivak (1988, 271–313) offers a critique of speaking for the cultural Other from the western perspective, which makes the subaltern its object. Spivak claims that Gilles Deleuze<sup>11</sup> neglects "the epistemic violence of imperialism" (1988, 289). Within a Western framework, the subaltern<sup>12</sup> cannot speak or express his or her true self. By speaking for subalterns through written works of the writer, their experiences are translated and interpreted into western language. However, Deleuze and Guattari's schizoanalysis does not seek to place the subaltern in the western framework. Their theory does not really focus on a Eurocentric notion or the majority. The schizoanalytic approach is actually non-occidental and non-European and has as its aim to move outside Eurocentric statism, deny rigid segmentarities, reject the system of categorization, and dismantle territorialization. Since the state oppresses people through its emphasis on uniqueness, Deleuze and Guattari introduce otherness, difference, and multiplicities. From this perspective, people with different desire – nomad, minoritarian,<sup>13</sup> and subaltern – can dismantle the constructed wall and disrupt control through a 'line of flight,' rhizomatic thoughts, schizoid movements,<sup>14</sup> and molecular flows<sup>15</sup> in the open space. To write or speak for the subaltern through a schizoanalytic approach is not to represent the truth about the subaltern in the Western manner of analysis; however, it is to create new connections. The writers become part of the subaltern, the minoritarian or the oppressed. According to Deleuze and Guattari (1994), the process of "speaking for" will render the possibilities of

10 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is an Indian scholar, literary theorist, feminist critic, and post-colonial intellectual.

11 Gilles Deleuze was a French philosopher whose most popular works were *Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*, both co-written with French psychoanalyst Félix Guattari.

12 Subaltern is a post-colonial term which designates the colonial population whose political voice is denied by the hierarchy of power of a colony, and whose existence is excluded and displaced socially, politically, and geographically from the socio-economic institutions of society.

13 One who is in a minority.

14 The movement which is driven by unrestricted desire.

15 The flow of desire is produced at a molecular level.

*becoming* because “The thinker is not acephalic, aphasic, or illiterate, but becomes so. He becomes Indian, and never stops becoming so – perhaps “so that” the Indian who is himself Indian becomes something else and tears himself away from his own agony” (1994, 109). The process of writing or speaking for the subaltern is not to represent or subjugate the subaltern into the western framework, but its aim is the process of becoming through the establishment of new connections. The writer or the speaker will become Other or become minor in the open space where the voice of the subaltern can be heard.

The task of schizoanalysis, then, is the schizorevolutionary type of interpretation which creates new flows, transversal connections, and multiple social relations through the lines of escape of desire. For Deleuze and Guattari, desire is not a matter of a sovereign subject and it does not lead to a unified subject or the fixity of being. Rather, it is a matter of flows and becoming with possibilities and futures. Through the rhizomatic movement on the molecular level, there are possibilities for the subaltern, the excluded, the nomad, and the minoritarian others in the smooth space. In the act of deterritorialization against an oppressive structure, the unexplored and transversal becoming is possible.

### 3 A Review of Literature

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) and Trace Peterson's “After Before and After” (2015) have been studied from a number of perspectives. Questions about gender have been raised and studied to understand transgender people in relation to race, struggle, triumph, body, dream, narrative, identity, and imagery.

One of several studies related to transgender in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is “Arundhati Roy's Fascinating Mess: Being an Activist and an Artist is Trickier Than It Sounds,” in which Sehgal claims that the novel presents the lives, struggles, and triumphs of queers, “however tiny” (2017, 37). For Sehgal, the novel contains only a very limited portrayal of the queers' fight and success. Moreover, Sehgal (2017, 38) criticizes the characterization of Anjum as formulaic because Anjum “never becomes more than her patched-together body and her partially realized dreams.”

My research argues against such negative criticism about the portrayal of queers, especially Anjum, in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. This research shows that the power of transgender people's desire drives them to fight against heteronormative norms, and Anjum's desire energizes her to be liberated from the oppressive society and hierarchical system which does not really accept

and respect her. It also demonstrates the process of Anjum's desire in forming new multiplicities of connections with other people in the graveyard to end all forms of alienation.

My view is echoed by a number of critics who see *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* in a positive light. In "A Supermarket of Grief: Roy's Second Novel Illuminates Humankind's Paradoxical Capacities for Cruelty and Kindness," Seaman sees Anjum as "the unifying force in this tale of suffering, sacrifice, and transcendence" (2017, 7). In this view, Anjum is a transgender protagonist who creates connections among differences. I agree with Seaman's positive view of Anjum in relation to transgenderism. However, some theory should be applied to better understand the transgender protagonist who tries to liberate herself and establish connections with others.

Another text of this study is Trace Peterson's "After Before and After," a poem received positively for its portrayal of transgender people. It has been praised because "[it] deconstructs a common narrative that scapegoats trans women for causing various ills of civilization" (PBS 2015). In this view, the poem transcends negative discourses, which condemn transgender women. Foster (2016) suggests that Peterson creates a new narrative for transgender women through powerful imagery. I agree that the poem is a creative portrayal of transgender women. However, transgender issues will be explored in more detail through the application of theory.

## 4 The Analysis

In this section, I will provide an analysis of, first, Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* and, second, Trace Peterson's "After Before and After." Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's theory of schizoanalysis will be applied to explore the experience of transgender people in India and America in their process of "becoming" towards liberation.

### 4.1 Analysis of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* has been criticized for its limited portrayal of transgender people's struggles and triumphs, and its formulaic depiction of Anjum, who is a transwoman. My research will argue against this criticism to show the transgender people's fight against heteronormativity in three main aspects as follows.

First, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* shows transgender people's triumph in constructing their own community outside heteronormative society while, at the same time, they have some power as social insiders. According to Sehgal

(2017, 37), *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* offers only a “tiny” portrayal of transgender people’s lives, struggles and triumphs. However, the experience of transgender people especially Anjum is richly portrayed in the first three chapters of the novel through gender performativity, and the construction and strengthening of the *Hijra* community through the narration of religious belief and history.

The gender performativity<sup>16</sup> of the *Hijra* shows their desire to become. *Hijras* express themselves through exaggerated femininity in clothing. In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, one spring morning, Aftab sees Bombay Silk “wearing bright lipstick, gold high heels and a shiny, green satin salwar kameez” (2017, 18). This gender performativity shows that she is not an ordinary woman but a transwoman because “no ordinary woman would have been permitted to sashay down the streets of Shahjahanabad dressed like that. Ordinary women in Shahjahanabad wore burqas or at least covered their heads and every part of their body except their hands and feet” (18–9). According to Deleuze and Guattari (2004, 296), the power of desire is significant because “desire is a machine, a synthesis of machines, a machinic arrangement – desiring-machines. The order of desire is the order of production.” From this perspective, desire is the driver for transgender people in the process of becoming. When Aftab sees Bombay Silk, he “wanted to be her” (19). Later, his desire energizes him to become a transwoman named Anjum. When Anjum becomes a *Hijra* in the Khwabgah, she “was finally able to dress in the clothes she longed to wear – the sequined, gossamer kurtas and pleated Patiala salwars, shararas, ghararas, silver anklets, glass bangles and dangling earrings” (26). With the desire to become, Anjum can really express herself as a *Hijra*.

The construction of a *Hijra* community shows the members’ desire to liberate themselves from heteronormative society. The Khwabgah, or House of Dreams, consists of people who desire to become *Hijra*. The narration of religious belief helps to strengthen the community. According to Deleuze and Guattari (2004, 348), a subject-group is “a group whose libidinal investments are themselves revolutionary; it causes desire to penetrate into the social field, and subordinates the socius or the form of power to desiring-production; productive of desire and a desire that produces.” The *Hijra* community can be seen as a subject-group with revolutionary power to generate desiring-production through the narration of religious belief. Anjum experiences suffering from conflicting desires when she “awoke distressed to find that her sexual pleasure

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16 Gender performativity is a term first used by Judith Butler, the feminist philosopher who proposes the idea that gender is an act or performance which may be different from biological sex.



had expressed itself into her beautiful new garment like a man's" (27). Anjum is ashamed of this feeling and "howled like a wolf, hitting herself on her head and between her legs, screaming with self-inflicted pain" (27). Ustad Kulsoom Bi helps relieve her pain and convinces her to become part of the *Hijra* community, telling Anjum that "Hijras were chosen people, beloved of the Almighty" and that the word *Hijra* means "a Body in which a Holy Soul lives" (27). Ustad Kulsoom Bi uses this religious belief to convince Anjum. It is a revolutionary power and causes Anjum's desire to increase until she decides to have sex reassignment surgery.

Second, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* presents transgender people's constructive desire to go beyond normative limits through the transgender protagonist Anjum, who has the desire to leave heteronormative society and the hierarchical system and move towards the possibility of liberation in the House of Dreams. In "Arundhati Roy's Fascinating Mess," Sehgal (2017, 38) criticizes Anjum's character as formulaic because of her patched-together body" and partially realized dreams." In Sehgal's view, Anjum does not really accomplish her goal. However, the process of moving towards the goal is more important than the goal itself. According to Deleuze and Guattari (2004, 382), the task of schizoanalysis is that of "completing the process and not arresting it, not making it turns (*sic*) about in the void, not assigning it a goal." In this respect, a goal is less important than the process of liberation which Anjum has been through. The heteronormative society has oppressed Anjum since she was young. When Anjum was a boy named Aftab, he was sent to Ustaad Hameed Khan to learn Hindustani classical music. Other children teased Aftab: "He's a She. He's not a He or a She. He's a He and a She. She-He, He-She Hee! Hee! Hee!" (12). After this incident, Aftab stops going to the class. One day, he learns that there is a *Hijra* community, so he leaves the society to join the Khwabgah. Nevertheless, the Khwabgah or the House of Dream has its own hierarchical system. There is a power struggle and conflict between the old and the new generations. Saeeda "was in close competition with Anjum to take over as Ustad of the Khwabgah when Jstad Kulsoom Bi decided to relinquish charge" (38–9). Later, Anjum decides to leave the Khwabgah and live in the graveyard, where her desire is liberated from any oppressive system.

Third, new connections are created in the graveyard and all forms of alienation are ended due to Anjum's desire. Anjum sets up the Jannat Guest House, or Paradise, which becomes "a hub for Hijras who, for one reason or another, had fallen out of, or been expelled from, the tightly administered grid of Hijra Gharanas" (68). Anjum's Jannat Guest House receives Hijras who leave the Khwabgah. There is no discrimination in this place. Although Anjum is the owner of the Jannat Guest House, everyone is equal and free. There is no



hierarchical system. Hijras seeking freedom and liberation are connected to one another in this place. Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome can be seen in the Hijras' transversal movement. Even though they finally come to live within the territory of the graveyard, their departure cuts across the normative line of heteronormative society and the hierarchical system of the Khwabgah through the line of flight or deterritorialization. At this point, they can celebrate the liberation of sexuality from any social construction. In this perspective, the Hijra, a group which has been perceived as outsiders, can be seen as free. The graveyard where the Hijra community is built can be seen as a paradise.

#### 4.2 *Analysis of "After Before and After"*

Trace Peterson's poem "After Before and After" has been praised for its creative portrayal of transgender people. My research applies Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's theory of schizoanalysis to show the possibilities of transgender people's liberation. "After Before and After" presents transgender people in a positive light. The speaker starts by saying that she is now independent from the oppressive power. She is not bound there anymore. She intends to oppose the civilization of heteronormativity. Being a transgender person is like a weather balloon hanging against the sky which exercises authority wrongfully. She can see that there is a transparent window which separates transgender people from "the world of Michael Kors" and deprives them of "the aftertaste of a kiss". A coda is not the end, but a beginning. The experiences of transgender people are a cycle – after, before, and after – of suffering without end. Their surroundings hurt them severely. The speaker presents a positive side through the image of goddesses in bed and a woman's stubble. Liberation can be seen in the end as an urgent note sent across the sky of the world of unhappiness. The possibility of achieving deterritorialization is portrayed in this poem in three aspects: a liberation from heteronormative society, the transversal movement and connection, and the line of flight or deterritorialization towards real liberation.

First, "After Before and After" shows transgender people's desire to be liberated from heteronormative society. The speaker says that she has been liberated from "the Fall of Rome" (2). The "Fall of Rome" can be seen as the established power which is in decline. So her bond with the declining oppressive power is "disrupted" (3). The speaker's "bet against [civilization's] rising" (6) shows her rebellion against the "rising" (6) of heteronormativity as part of "civilization" (4).

Second, the poem presents transgender people's freedom through transversal movements and connections. Guattari (2015, 113) explains the concept of

transversality as “a dimension that tries to overcome both the impasse of pure verticality and that of mere horizontality.” In this perspective, the transversal movement is the motion to transcend the established heteronormative society. In “After Before and After,” the transversal movement can be seen in “a weather balloon that hangs against a vast usurped sky” (7–9). Since the sky can be seen as horizontal, “weather balloon” (7) can be seen as a line, which cuts across the normative and oppressive “usurped sky” (9). Moreover, a “carrier pigeon” (9–10) which “carries” (11) her shows the transversal movement and its ability to move freely in the sky. Furthermore, the transversal movement leads to new connections as the speaker “can find the edge of the cunning, supposedly clear window” (12–4) which separates transgender people from “the world of Michael Kors” (15–6), which represents dreams and elegance. Transgender people have also been separated from happiness as a kiss is divided “from its aftertaste” (17–8). When the connection is established, she can find the happiness of which she has been deprived.

Lastly, the poem shows transgender people's line of flight or deterritorialization towards real liberation. According to Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 25), the concept of “rhizome” highlights the deconstruction of a hierarchical system because a rhizome “does not designate a localizable relation going from one thing to the other and back again, but a perpendicular direction, a transversal movement that sweeps one and the other away, a stream without beginning or end that undermines its banks and picks up speed in the middle.” There is the transversal movement and rhizomatic connection in “what's enhanced delivering an urgent note across a field of blue” (32–4). The desire of transgender people can flow in all directions as the transversal movement “across a field of blue” (34) is not only the movement across the sky, but also the line of flight or deterritorialization from the depressing state of heteronormative oppression to real liberation and the absence of any territory.

## 5 Conclusion

*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* and “After Before and After” present transgender people's lines of flight towards liberation from the heteronormative society and any oppression. My research applies Deleuze and Guattari's theory of schizoanalysis to explore how in both texts transgender people can go beyond normative limits. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* shows the transgender people's flight against heteronormativity in three aspects: the Hijras' desire to construct their own community outside heteronormative society, Anjum's desire to leave heteronormative society and later the hierarchical system in the

House of Dreams to liberate herself from the oppressive power, and Anjum's desire to establish new connections in the graveyard and demolish the alienation among Hijras in the place she calls "paradise." The poem "After Before and After" shows the possibilities for transgender people's liberation in three aspects: Transgender people's freedom from heteronormative oppression in the established society, the transversal movement and connection of transgender people towards liberation, and transgender people's line of flight or deterritorialization towards real liberation. Thus, both texts shows a hopeful view of transgender people's liberation.

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