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Fantasy and history in postcolonial India: the case of Arundhati Roy's anti-global novel

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ABSTRACT

Even if Roy employs some magic realist elements drawn from her Booker-winning debut novel *The God of Small Things* (1997), in her second novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), the use of fantasy and realism is less concerned with an aesthetic function than with an anti-global one. In the novel, tropes of vulnerability affect individuals and environments alike, promoting not only a poetics of loss but also a radical critique of such social questions as anti-globalisation, environmentalism, anti-nuclear campaigns and land rights in Kashmir. This article explores the juxtaposition of Bharati fantasy and historical realism in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, and investigates the ways in which a hybrid narrative format manages to convey a complex and rich plot of contemporary India, where gender questions, caste discriminations, wounded landscapes and religious conflicts animate a tale of decay and hope. By resorting to Hindu epics, on the one hand, and to the intellectual activism typical of her non-fiction works on the other, Roy issues both a warning and an invitation to take into account the contradictions of present-day postcolonial India.

Keywords

Arundhati Roy, anti-globalisation, postcolonialism, Bharati fantasy, historical realism

A complex novel for a paradoxical country

It took Arundhati Roy two decades to complete her second and last novel. Between the Booker Prize-winning debut novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997) – which, drawing on Roy's political concerns, testifies the interconnectedness between colonialism and globalisation – and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), the Indian writer published several volumes of non-fiction, addressing such socio-political questions as anti-globalisation, environmentalism, anti-nuclear campaigns, and land rights in Kashmir. Like *The God of Small Things*, Roy's last novel explores the legacies of Partition but, unlike her first novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* lacks the sense of unity epitomised by the family saga in southern India of her previous work. In its twelve chapters, which intersperse chronological linearity with flashbacks, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* combines an omniscient narrative voice and multiple subjective perspectives that take turns to contribute to a kaleidoscopic storytelling. The multi-layered plot features two protagonists, Anjum and Tilo, and a wide range of secondary characters that make the narrative longer and looser. The omniscient narrative viewpoint is often replaced by a shifting focalization on other characters that recount their stories without inhibition, while, at times, letters, diaries, text-messages and poems are employed to make the events more genuine and

authentic. Even so, Roy combines storytelling skills with intellectual activism, shaping a complex and rich plot of contemporary India. The narrative thus thematises the contradictions of a postcolonial nation, specifically the matter of the *hijra* communities (male-to-female transgenders), the rise of Hindu nationalism, the struggle for Kashmiri independence, the plight of caste discrimination, the impact of rapid industrialisation on the environment and the effects of globalisation on society. Fragile ecologies and social outcasts are the central motifs that animate a tale that juxtaposes social and magical realism, envisaging an attention to precariousness that makes an early appearance in the prologue, where Roy describes the mysterious death of vultures "died of diclofenac poisoning" (Roy 2017, Prologue). Environmental degradation and chemical pollution do not provide a propitious *incipit* for what happens later in the novel. The text exposes environments and mankind to high degrees of vulnerability and exhibits a radical social critique by recourse to a wide range of literary devices: the various traits of traumatic realism, like fragmentation, spectrality and chronological disarray (Rothberg 2000), merge with more ferocious tones, typical of her non-fictional works.

Albeit central to the text, the ethical issues touch the narrative also on a formal level. The anti-global sentiments that constantly emerge in the novel show how globalisation is a continuation of British imperialism and neoliberal policies. Roy pays attention to the global, infusing the historical reconstruction of the storyline with narrative techniques that resist the logic of globalisation and hegemony. She grounds her critique of globalisation in the use of the poetic language of epics and natural decay, showing a tendency towards self-reflexivity. The use of analepsis and the complex merging of dreams, hallucinations, myths and fantasy is a self-reflexive device, which allows for the ontological exploration of the self. In addition, the presence of the author, through alter-egos (like Tilo), critical voices (like Biplab) and intra-textual links to her non-fiction works, functions as a self-reflexive device. In consonance with the view of postmodern fiction as "self-reflexive" or "self-informing" (Hutcheon 1980, 1),[1] the intrusion of the author into the fictional world valorises the concept of hybridity insomuch as it contributes to a sense of care of the powerless, inviting readers to meditate on the fictionality of the story while also encouraging them to fit the various pieces into a coherent whole. Hybridity, therefore, resonates with Roy's insistence on the disempowered and the wounded, crafting a complex narrative where chronological fragmentation, multiple narrative perspectives, reworking of ancient myths, liminal identities and the language of ecological vulnerability are used to bring aesthetics into ethics, framing a poetic style that embraces hybridity to challenge the globalising forces of contemporary time.

This article tries to read Roy's last novel in line with her intellectual commitment to anti-globalisation. To do so, I address the juxtaposition of fictional fantasy and historical realism, thus illustrating how *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* can be read as a fictional meditation on globalisation, understood as an unstable and unequal dehumanising economic process. In the following pages, I tentatively distinguish between two layers embedded in the text: Bharati

fantasy and historical realism. It seems that the form Roy employs – with its amalgam of mythological elements, drawn from Hindu epic narratives, and historical reconstructions – makes *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* a good example of a postcolonial novel where surreal and grotesque effects are intertwined with a fictional realist mode. By giving voice to those who dwell on the margins, Roy's hybrid textual format poses questions on the historical mechanisms that entrap nations and individuals, conveying a postcolonial critique of globalisation through a planetary vision of care and solidarity that opens up to hope and redemption, in an echo of Édouard Glissant's poetics of relation.

Challenging identities: *hijras* between Bharati fantasy and Hindu epics

The novel opens in the wake of Partition, when a Muslim Delhi housewife, Jahanara Begum, finally begets a son, Aftab, after three daughters. The jubilation, however, is only a few days long since the woman discovers "nestling underneath his boy-parts, a small unformed girl-part. […] Her child is a hermaphrodite" (Roy 2017, 7). The woman's reaction is one of surprise and disbelief:

> In Urdu, the only language she knew, *all* things, not just living things but all things – carpets, clothes, books, pens, musical instruments – had a gender. Everything was either masculine or feminine, man or woman. Everything except her baby. Yes of course she knew there was a word for those like him – *Hijra*. Two words actually, *Hijra* and *Kinnar*. But two words do not make a language. Was it possible to live outside language? Naturally this question did not address itself to her in words, or as a single lucid sentence. It addressed itself to her as a soundless, embryonic howl. (8)

Interestingly, the extract examines the meaning of gender in both life and language, stretching the linguistic power of designating identity to its limits. As Jahanara Begum ponders, her child seems to dwell on the threshold of language, a conundrum also epitomised by the two words the woman can only think of. *Hijra* and *Kinnar*, however, are not synonyms: while the first means "both man and woman" (Nanda 2014, 29), thus describing eunuchs and hermaphrodites, the latter strikes its roots in Hindu mythology. According to legends, *Kinnars* were celestial singers belonging to the realm of the Gods, ethereal creatures symbolically embodied in the very etymology of the name Aftab, "sunlight." A sense of spiritual transcendence permeates Roy's novel, specifically in Aftab's storyline. Years later, when he becomes a transgender, Aftab will learn that *hijras* are "chosen people, beloved of the Almighty" and that the word *hijra* means "a Body in which a Holy Soul lives" (Roy 2017, 27). The parable of Aftab, as I will explain, metaphorically breaks open myths, connecting mankind and the divine with a display of linguistic acrobatics that blends fiction, fantasy and politics.

As Aftab grows, he tends to behave like a girl: "[h]e could sing Chaiti and Thumri with the accomplishment and poise of a Lucknow courtesan" (12). He is teased by the other children at school and, one day, upon seeing a fascinating woman wearing bright lipstick and a green kameez, he follows her to a mysterious house with a blue doorway. Bombay Silk, the weird

woman, is a *hijra* who shares the place, called House of Dreams (*Khwabgah*), with other seven transgender people, Bulbul, Razia, Heera, Baby, Nimmo, Gudiya, and Mary. Although they were born male, all of them wanted to be women and some have had surgery on their male genitals. They earn their living as prostitutes or by blessing childbirths, weddings and other auspicious occasions. Aftab is attracted to the idea of being part of the community in the House of Dreams and, after a series of errands for the *hijras*, he joins the group when he turns fifteen, changing his name into Anjum, and eventually has surgery.

While her father stops talking to her, Jahanara sends her a hot meal every day and they occasionally meet at the local shrine of Hazrat Sarmand Shaheed. The holy place, located in the heart of Old Delhi, is a symbol of the controversial connection between gender and religious traditions: according to the legend, Safi Sarmand was a rich "Jewish Armenian merchant who had travelled to Delhi from Persia in pursuit of the love of his life" (9). Upon moving to India, he fell in love with a Hindu boy and finally became a *fakir*. He started to roam Delhi streets naked and his mystic lifestyle attracted flock of men, among whom the heir to the throne, Dara Shukoh. When Shukoh's brother came to power, Sarmand was arrested and brutally murdered. The story of his martyrdom, hence, establishes a clear parallel with Aftab's experience and it provides a further example of Roy's fusion of history and folklore: if history has strict rules, legends can be rich and fluid and, as the narrator informs us, Sarmand's spirit "permitted to those who came to him to take his story and turn it into whatever they needed it to be" (10), thus becoming a symbol for Indian *hijras*.

Roy's narrative is constructed of images of history and myth that make the present a complex amalgamation of past moments. The disordering of time is not simply a postmodern self-reflexive aesthetic solution, it also provides a vivid portrait of the hybrid identity of the *hijras*. Throughout the story the reader encounters digressions about these liminal subjects, depicted as vulnerable and abused individuals, above all by the English colonisers. In this novel, memory brings the reader back to a nostalgic mythical time, when *hijras* were respected. Transgender people, by contrast, are still being molested and marginalised in contemporary India and one could then argue that the fragmented temporality of the novel highlights the sense of trauma and vulnerability, working as a metafictional tool that rewrites history and denounces the effects of globalisation and neo-colonisation, as the story of the *hijras* can show.

Hijras are believed to possess magic powers in India, to bring luck and to provide fertility. Their songs, curses and dances are considered potent, operating through an occult language. According to Serena Nanda, "[t]he faith in the powers of the *hijras* rests on the Hindu belief in *Shakti* – the potency of the dynamic female forces of creation that the *hijras*, as vehicles of the Mother Goddess, represent" (1990, 5). When an infant is born a hermaphrodite, they insist that the child is given to them in order to raise the baby as one of them. *Hijras* have been part of the Indian subcontinent for about as long as the Hindu civilization has existed, a millennial past recorded in the words of the *Ustad* (master) of the *hijras* living in the House of Dreams: "[t]his

house, this household, has an unbroken history that is as old as this broken city" (Roy 2017, 50), she declares. Their history in India is intertwined with religious devotion, social integration, mythological recognition and scepticism. They have been mentioned in Hindu epic texts dating back to the 4th century B.C. and one of Shiva's avatar, the main Hindu divinity, is called Ardhanari, an androgynous creature born of the fusion between Shiva himself and his wife Parvati. While in the Mughul era, between the 16th and 19th century, they played a crucial role in public positions "as political advisors, administrators, generals as well as guardians of the harems" (Michelraj 2015, 18), under the British colonial rule *hijra* communities came to be discriminated and criminalised through various laws,[2] a marginalisation that still affects *hijras* in contemporary times. Today, it is estimated that about 6 million transgender people live in India and their socio-political persecution has partially come to an end in 2014 when the India Supreme Court recognised them as "third gender," a decision which has triggered a wide range of legal measures "to prevent human rights violations of the transgender community and institutional mechanisms to address specific concerns of transgender people" (19). Roy, who prefers the word *hijra* to the more politically-correct term 'transgender', negotiates the dynamics between nostalgic recollections of a lost world and present-day struggles for civil rights, and employs the *hijra* community as a symbol of vulnerability and sacrifice, a metonymic signifier for India itself.

And yet, the *hijra* community in the novel functions as both a poetic strategy and a political choice that contributes to the mixture of fantasy and intellectual activism. Roy features *hijras* as vulnerable subjects who seem to be endowed with a paradoxical power of adaptation that makes them the perfect emblem of a contradictory country. In line with the Hindu epic tradition, in particular in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*,[3] Roy depicts the community in the House of Dreams as an alternative magic world dwelling in a surreal location, a poetic narrative solution that evokes the genre of Bharati Fantasy. I am using the term 'Barahati Fantasy' as illustrated by D. Varughese (2017) to describe a mode of fictional writing that "anchors its narratives or at least takes considerable inspiration from various Hindu scriptures and epic texts through retellings, interpretation and inspired versions of the ideas and characters present in the 'original' material" (32). In Varughese's definition, the term includes a body of post-millennial fiction in English by Indian writers combining the myth of Mother India (*Bharat Mata*), with its rich set of stories, traditions and legends, and a Western readership that, because of a limited knowledge of the world portrayed in these novels, will interpret the narratives as 'unreal'. The core of Varughese's discourse relies on the way a sense of Indian-ness is communicated to the readers, in light of a growing *corpus* of Indian fiction in English and of the proliferation of a readership market in the West. Unlike western mythology, that for Varughese "uses 'narrative' to convey certain truths" (30), myths in India correspond to "that which was believed to have happened in the past" (30), providing a framework for fictions based on "a shared history and a set of attitudes for living" (35). The factual content of Bharati

Fantasy, therefore, promotes an idea of literature as a means to connect history and imagination. Such non-realist representation of India, especially to Western readers, becomes a way of recording a postcolonial critique of the social inequalities of marginalised people and of the horrid injustices of present-day India, contributing to the hybrid narrative frame that integrates history and myth.

In the *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, the community of the *hijras* conveys a sense of weird otherness, specifically for a Western audience. Hindu mythology, Nanda comments, "contains numerous examples of androgynies, impersonators of the opposite sex, and individuals who undergo sex changes, both among deities and humans" (1990, 20), an ambiguous and liminal position that explains the ability of *hijras* of maintaining an important position in Indian culture. In the *Ramayana*, for instance, when the legendary hero Rama is exiled, he inhibits his subjects, both men and women, from following him into the forest. When he returns home, after fourteen years, he finds out that *hijras*, being neither men nor women, have not moved from the place where he gave his speech, showing a great devotion to their prince. For this reason, Rama granted *hijras* the power to bless childbirths and marriages, a perfomative role that Roy shares in the novel. As the *Ustad* of the House of Dreams remarks, *hijras* "were members of the staff of the Royal Palace" (Roy 2017, 51) during the reign of Emperor Mohammed Shah Rangeela, in the first half of the eighteenth century. The old guru of the community lays claim to the legendary first eunuchs living at court and, as she states, "[w]hat mattered was that it *existed*. To be present in history, even as nothing more than a chuckle, was a universe away from being absent from it, from being written out of it altogether" (51). History hence flows everywhere, even in the House of Dreams, where it blends with individual stories and fantasy: when one of the *hijras* retrieves the mythological story of prince Rama that has made them known as "the forgotten ones" (51) – because the prince had addressed only men and women – the *Ustad* replies that the household was called *Khwabgah* (heaven), because "it was where special people, blessed people, came with their dreams that could not be realized in the Duniya" (53).[4] Thus, the novel seems to suggest that history cannot keep an account for all and that the essence of mankind, in all its various manifestations, might be disclosed through a combination of official events and ancient myths or fairy tales. In a similar vein, *hijras* are regarded as personifications of respect and devotion in the *Mahabharata*. Here, Iravan, a minor character, expresses his desire to get a wife before a decisive battle, but women refuse to marry a man doomed to die. So, Krishna takes the form of a woman, Mohini, and decides to marry Iravan.[5] Roy's Anjum, hence, symbolically echoes the mythological Hindu heroine. In line with the classic iconography that portrays Mohini as a celestial enchantress, Anjum means 'star', a linguistic choice that entails political reflections on the question of gender in the contemporary Indian context.

Despite the style mixing fantasy and elegy which attracts the readers' attention, the novel takes a clear political stand: stories of victimhood and pain, revolving around such postcolonial

conflicts as the Gujurat riots, the Kashmir's genocide, the Iraqi war in the aftermath of the 9/11 terror, just to name a few, gravitate into one another, revealing a complex global scenario where minorities and neglected communities experience and witness to devastating violence. In line with the dedication of the book, "to the unconsoled," Roy's novel exhibits an engagement with outcasts, wounded characters, fragile environments and historical frictions, revealing a double-edge pattern of gain and loss floating around a narrative of trauma and suffering. Though Roy's distillation of mythological episodes in a historical background reflects Varughese's view that Barahati Fantasy authors "narrate stories grounded in shared historical knowledge" (2017, 41), a sense of weirdness percolates through the novel: despite the real-world background against which the story is set, a choice that subverts the ancient temporalities typical of the fantasy genre, the weird fictional account creates "an atmosphere of dread from unknown forces or beings" (28), thus challenging fixed ideas of historical objectivity.

Postcolonial contradictions: wounded ecology, *Dalits* and religious minorities

Whereas the first part of the novel revolves around Anjum, pivoting on her personal story and its various mythological echoes, the other strand of the narrative focuses on the barbarities of history, filtered through the experiences of a young woman, Tilo, and her three lovers. Tilo's relationship with all of them shifts the focus of the novel from fantasy to politics, delving into the Kashmir conflict. All the characters involved in this section have known each other since university times, in the mid-1980s, and what readers learn about the woman is distilled through the perspective of the three men: Musa, a Kashmiri freedom fighter; Naga, a left-wing corrupt journalist, whom Tilo eventually marries; and Biplap, a senior officer in the Indian Intelligence Bureau, who discloses most of the mysteries about Tilo. In the 1990s, during the pro-Independence Kashmir crisis, their paths cross again, like puzzle pieces that, despite the chronological disarray, link this strand of the novel with Anjum's story, finally fitting into the whole narrative.

Anjum's life seems to be exclusively related to the House of Dreams, but eventually the external world, the *duniya* as *hijras* call it, makes its way into the *Khwabgah* with its atrocities. After adopting a baby daughter, Zainab, Anjum is caught in the 2002 Gujarat pogrom,[6] where she witnesses the tragic murder of one of her friends and is herself brutally treated and imprisoned. Anjum's traumatic experience has an impact on her already fragile condition, nurturing her feelings of alienation from the places and the people around her. She then moves from New Delhi's centre to the suburbs, building her new home in the graveyard where her ancestors are buried. Here, Anjum creates a new community, Jannat Guest House, which becomes a home, or paradise,[7] to an unusual assortment of outcasts. On the threshold of a secular sanctuary, Anjum lives "like a tree" (Roy 2017, 3), part of a fragile natural word, a deep ecological perspective that constantly informs the novel. Against the backdrop of 'India Shining',[8] where the construction of a vast dam system, the so-called Narmada Valley Development Project, is damaging the environment, pushing the country into a debt to the World

Bank, and "[s]kyscrapers and steel factories sprang up where forests used to be, rivers were sold and bottled in supermarkets, fish were tinned, mountains mined and turned into shining missiles" (98), Anjum's resilience is like a spectral presence that works as an antidote to the poison of the globalising economic boom. Anjum, who "conferred with the ghosts of vultures that loomed in her high branches" (3), transforms the graveyard, a place of death, into one of recovery: her experience seems to suggest that shared humanity, not economic growth, is essential for humankind. And yet, before getting to such a point of hope, readers have to go through other traumas.

Roy alternates between elegiac scenes – like the above-mentioned one in the graveyard, where the victims of degradation and displacement are given voice – and ecological investigations, philosophical meditations on modernity and globalisation, and historical reconstructions. Embracing the form of a report, the second part of the novel refuses to step into the melancholic form of repetitions and temporal suspense, typical of trauma fiction, and it moves towards the polemic tones of Roy's non-fiction works, such as *Capitalism: A Ghost Story*, a biting denunciation of the capitalist logic that is consuming India, especially through the plundering of the natural resources. The portrait of the nation is a searing one, where various ghosts, such as dispossessed farmers who have killed themselves, and poisoned rivers, haunt this anti-global pamphlet. Roy claims that "[c]apitalism is destroying the planet. The two old tricks that dug it out of past crises – War and Shopping – simply will not work" (2014, 558). Likewise, the novel also touches upon the legacy of the 1984 Union Carbide Bhopal disaster,[9] an ecological catastrophe that highlights the political tone of the story. By narrating the visionary dream of Gulabiya Vechania, a traumatised survivor of the incident, Roy ironically invokes environmental justice, a central tenet of the postcolonial ecocritical agenda:

> In Gulabiya's dream his river was still flowing, still alive. Naked children still sat on rocks, playing the flute, diving into the water to swim among the buffaloes when the sun grew too hot. There were leopard and sambar and sloth bear in the Sal forest that clothed the hill above the village where during festivals his people would gather with their drums to drink and dance for days. (Roy 2017, 113)

Postcolonial ecocritics associate the historical processes of colonisation to the exploitation of the natural resources and, as Huggan and Tiffin contend, they warn that there is "no social justice without environmental justice" (2010, 29). Ecological care takes on important socio-political implications. From the cows intoxicated with chemicals "to ease pain and increase the production of milk" (Roy 2017, np) to the vultures that die because they eat poisoned cows' carcasses, the novel investigates current environmental problems, in line with the tenets of postcolonial ecocriticism. Roy expresses anxiety and fears for the abuse of the ecological equilibrium, denouncing the evil of natural violation. As the narrator observes, "the air was chemical and the water poisonous" (100) and the construction of the dam causes the most vulnerable people to be displaced, since "villages were being emptied, cities too, millions of

people were being moved, but nobody knew where to" (98). Significantly, Roy integrates human and non-human wounds, by blending ecological hazards that expose nature as "a contested space where different spatial fantasies and histories are accumulated, and the land is revealed both as a speaking subject and as disputed object of discursive management and material control" (Huggan and Tiffin 2015, 20). Moreover, Roy's ecocritical stance seems to echo Glissant's "aesthetics of the earth" (1997, 149): the Martinican poet and writer sees the earth, specifically the topos of the plantation, as a form of resistance to the colonial process of global markets that eliminate localisms and, at the same time, as a rhizomatic network that connects the local to the global. Drawing on Heidegger's understanding of the earth as a potential resource for ontological exploration, Glissant advocates for an "aesthetics of rupture and connection" (151) that neither celebrates nor excludes unicity, but "in which each is changed by and changes the other" (155). Roy's commitment to ecology is similarly manifested through images of land predation and, though traumatic, such apocalyptic portrait suggests a glimmer of hope, a "temporary solace" (Roy 2017, 400) for the sense of grief.

Thus, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is interspersed with harsh tones that connect imagination and reality. The author consistently writes about people living in precarious conditions, such as religious minorities, and engages with the violence emerging from ongoing tensions. The Gujurat agitation, for instance, had already been discussed in *Field Notes on Democracy*, which collects a number of essays and articles written between 2002 and 2008. Here, Roy argues that the future of India is threatened by an authoritarian power that takes the form of "a flawed democracy laced with religious fascism" (2009, 31). The author attacks Indian national politicians by blaming them for the discrimination of Muslim minorities and she claims that the local government in Gujarat, led by conservative Chief Minister Narendra Modi, was responsible for a carefully planned genocide against Muslims, in the wake of the widespread Islamophobia generated all over the world by the 9/11 terrorist hijackings. According to Roy, Indian politicians have exploited globalisation to dispossess people of lands and rights, "[a]nd now corporate globalisation is being relentlessly and arbitrarily imposed on an essentially feudal society, tearing through its complex, tiered, social fabric, ripping it apart culturally and economically" (46).

Roy addresses the plight of the most vulnerable citizens of contemporary India, such as the *Dalits* who dwell at the bottom of the Hindu caste system, a commitment that can be equally traced in the tragic character of Velutha in *The God of Small Things*. Set against the backdrop of the Naxal insurgencies of the 1960s,[10] the novel depicts Velutha as an "untouchable" who supports the Maoist credo and is finally massacred, a position that Roy subverts in her second novel. Here, the author features a young *Dalit* man who has taken the name of Saddam Hussein. Whereas Velutha is punished for his affiliation to Naxalism, Saddam, whose father had been lynched by Hindu fanatics terrorizing people in the name of a cow-protection campaign, joins the community in Jannat Guest House, awaiting the day when he can avenge

his father's assassination. Through this chameleonic character, Roy strongly criticises the tyranny of Hindu nationalism by showing how lower castes can suffer from fanaticism and violence: Saddam is a Hindu pretending to be a Muslim in order to escape his past. The *Dalit* character in Roy's second novel possesses the incendiary combination of low caste and religious tension running through him, a complicated juxtaposition reflected in the name he chooses. He renames himself after seeing the video of the execution of the Iraqi ex-president, admiring the dignity of his stoic resistance and yet knowing nothing about his tyrannical power. Roy's Saddam, thus, is a symbol of fragility and rancour that intra-textually introduces the political tones in the novel. A victim of Indian nationalism, he is displaced by Hindu sectarianism and communal violence but, by saving Tilo and a baby foundling from a riot, he also links the two heroines of the novel.

Historical frictions: the question of Kashmir

In chapters 7 and 11, both entitled "The Landlord," Roy presents the perspective of Biplab, shifting to the first-person narration in order to provide readers with insights on the Kashmir troubles. Biplab, nicknamed by Tilo "Garson Hobart" (the name of a character in a play they had rehearsed at university[11]), is Tilo's landlord in Delhi and his narrative perspective sounds like Roy's critics of her positions on the Kashmir plight. Biplab and Tilo first met in 1984, when the Prime Minister Indira Ghandi had been killed by her two Sikh bodyguards and Delhi Sikhs were assassinated in revenge. In a country where normality is "like a boiled egg: its humdrum surface conceals at its heart a yolk of egregious violence" (Roy 2017, 150), Biplab seems to epitomise the typical Hindu nationalist who feels anger at "those grumbling intellectuals and professional dissenters who constantly carp about this great country" (147), claiming a great pride in being a servant of the Indian State. Initially, Biplab's cynic reflections deal with the struggle between India and Kashmir, a war where "[a]ll the protagonists on all sides of the conflict, especially us, exploited these fault line mercilessly […] a war that can never be won or lost, a war without end" (181).

Being a member of the Indian Intelligence, Biplab unveils the atrocities that India has committed. The tensions between the Indian government and the northern region of the subcontinent date back to 1947 when, in the aftermath of Partition and the end of the British colonial rule, the region was contended by Pakistan and India, with a growing demand for separatism by local people. As Biplap remarks, in this more than quarter-century-long conflict "Kashmiris mourned, wept, shouted their slogans, but in the end they always went back home" (181). In the name of geopolitical borders, local people raise their voices for *Azadi*, freedom, a chant that generates endless violence and pain. Through the ironic voice of an Indian governmental official, Roy denounces the wicked abuses of human rights in the valley, a stance that she has taken in several essays. In "Azadi: The Only Thing Kahmiris Want", for instance, Roy attacks the Indian state that she holds responsible for having contributed to "subvert, suppress,

represent, misrepresent, discredit, interpret, intimidate, purchase, and simply snuff out the voice of the Kashmiri people" (Roy 2011, 58). Though ironic, Bipbal's words thus illustrate the vehemence of Roy's support to Kashmir independence and they reverberate with the traumatic images that the novel records: "[d]eath was everywhere. Death was everything. Career. Desire. Dream. Poetry. Love. Youth itself. Dying became just another way of living" (Roy 2017, 314).

The military tensions wreak havoc in the region, causing journalists and tourists to escape, while its ecosystem is seriously threatened. Whereas autumn in the valley is associated to "immodest abundance […] orchards heavy with fruit, Chinar threes on fire" (347), another scent permeates the valley, "the smell of dread" (347). Despite his political commitment, Biplab, who is addicted to alcohol and suffers from mental breakdown, since he is a witness to the barbarities of the military missions in the area, has glimpses of the beauty of the place and of the futility of the war: he observes the natural landscape that, at the threshold of autumn, changes colours, with meadows turning "coppery gold" (167), while leopards, bears and deer run in the forests. As he comments, "[i]t made one feel that Kashmir really belonged to those creatures. That none of us who were fighting over it […] none of us, neither saint nor soldier, had the right to claim the truly heavenly beauty of that place for ourselves" (167-168). The insistence on the decay of natural beauty in poor and exploited areas is a *leitmotif* in Roy's anti-global and postcolonial aesthetics, a position she has clearly taken in the eponymous essay in *The End of Imagination* where she writes that "[t]here is beauty yet in this brutal, damaged world of ours. Hidden, fierce, immense. Beauty that is uniquely ours and beauty that we have received with race from others, enhanced, reinvented, and made our own" (Roy 2016, 63). Though responsible for the atrocities, Bipbal seems also a victim of one of the many contradictions that India has faced since the end of the colonial occupation, embodying the idea of the monstrosity of human nature that Roy has expressed in her views over the Kashmir troubles: "[t]he Indian military occupation of Kashmir," Roy claims, "makes monsters of us all" (2011, 71). And yet, Bipbal's cynicism makes space for suffering when Roy shifts again the focus of the novel from the political to the personal.

The narrative abruptly plunges into the life of Tilo and Musa. The woman leaves her husband Naga, who takes an opportunistic move from left-wing political ideas to right-wing propaganda, disguised under the fake career of a journalist. Tilo then travels to Kashmir to find her old lover, Musa, whose wife Arefa and daughter Miss Jebeen have been killed in a riot. Musa is a Kashmiri freedom fighter who aims at overthrowing the Indian rule and his revolutionary political ideas lead the novel towards its conclusion. The reunion of the two lovers allows for scenes of love and passion, where "for a fleeting moment they were able to repudiate the world they lived in and call forth another one, just as real" (Roy 2017, 362), in an echo of the love scene between Ammu and Velutha in *The God of Small Things*. Thus, Roy balances scenes of loss and decay with glimpses of irony, giddiness and hope and it is a new birth that

eventually connects Tilo to Anjum.

The tales of the two heroines intersect at Jannat Guest House where Tilo finds refuge and adopts a baby whom she names Udaya Jebeen II, in memory of Naga's slaughtered daughter. The baby is a foundling recovered from a Delhi protest earlier in the novel, a reminiscence of the brutality of mankind. Again, Roy hinges on the allegorical meaning of names: true to the etymology of her name, Udaya meaning 'sun rising' and Jebeen 'forehead', the baby is a symbol of future hope and consolation. Though the novel begins and ends in a graveyard, such a liminal space seems the emblem of India itself, suspended precariously between life and death, decay and regeneration. Despite the bleak situation, Jannat Guest House ends with images of relation and birth: the vegetable garden was blooming, "the soil of the graveyard being as it was a compost pit of ancient provenance" (399). The aesthetics of the earth yields "brinjals, beans, chillies, tomatoes and several kinds of gourds, all of which, despite the smoke and fumes from the heavy traffic on the roads that abutted the graveyard, attracted several varieties of butterflies" (399), a compensative scene that echoes again Glissant's poetics of relation as a correlative of an exploration of the self that never gives up hoping for community and relationality.

Conclusion

With all its literary sources and cultural echoes, Shakespeare, Neruda, Leonard Cohen, Nazim Hikmet and Urdu poems, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* reverberates with a postcolonial stance in that it portrays a national allegory in the aftermath of the independence from British colonialism. In a blend of fantasy and historical fiction, the novel depicts the ontological and environmental degradation of a world where the evils of globalisation appear more harmful than those of the previous colonisation. In this sense, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* may be seen as a postcolonial novel that registers the atrocities and wounds of a recent-born country with its mythological past and an uncertain future. The hybrid narrative format, with the voices of the various characters, the juxtaposition of narrative modes and perspectives, the incorporation of songs and poems, the references to Hindu *Itihasa*, and the language of ecology, posits a productive model of amalgamation and contestation, an ethical position that aligns Roy with Édouard Glissant's planetary vision of the postcolonial world in the increasingly globalised reality. In my view, Roy's complex fusion of epic story-telling and historiographical reconstruction recalls Glissant's poetics of relation, a point beautifully illustrated in a poem written by Tilo towards the end of the novel: "How to tell a shattered story? By slowly becoming everybody. No. By slowly becoming everything" (436). The lines are a kind of metanarrative coda that alerts readers to the hybrid format of the novel: while characters and nature seem to be engulfed by events, writing stands as a way to embrace and encompass everything. The figural language of the novel transmits a 'poetics of relation' that, in Glissant's terms, opens to "the fluctuating complexity of the world" (1997, 32), a critical and ethical method aimed at

safeguarding the particular against the tyranny of globalising forces.

By concluding the story in this way, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* displays the ambitious scope of Roy's narrative. Albeit fragmented and apparently disconnected pieces until one reaches the conclusion, the story entails the possibility of a coexistence, edging towards a sense of hope that "things would turn out alright in the end" (Roy 2017, 438). Roy's tale of warning and metamorphosis thus inhabits a liminal space. As suggested, we might consider the novel as a sort of passionate anti-global critique, imbued with such intellectual activism where dissenting "becomes an ethical responsibility for those who have access to information and the ability to express that information" (Jeffers 2009, 160). And yet, though overtly political, the novel's infusion of history and myth, fact and fiction, reveals how storytelling remains a powerful weapon to convey great truths about a fragmented world.

Notes

[1] In *Narcissistic Narratives: The Metafictional Paradox*, Linda Hutcheon calls postmodern fiction "self-reflexive," pointing to the fact that these narratives draw the reader's attention to how stories are told. Hutcheon argues that there are two levels of self-reflexivity. While overt self-reflexivity occurs with "allegorization" and "thematization," covert forms, on the other hand, are "structuralized, internalized and actualized" (1980, 30). Covert forms, for instance, employ the narrative format of the detective story or of fantasy, where interpretation and imagination engage readers with sharing the creative process of writing.

[2] As Michelraj argues, *hjiras* were vigoursly repulsed by the Anglo-Indian administration and the 1871 Criminal Tribes Act punished *hjiras* castrating children or wearing women's clothes with a large fine and two years in prison. See Michelraj 2015.

[3] The *Ramayana*, as the title suggests, narrates the life of Rama, a divine prince who fights against the demon king Ravana in order to rescue his wife. The poem, which contains about 24,000 verses, is considered the oldest Hindu epic text, dating back to the 6th century B.C. Together with the *Mahabharata*, 4th century B.C., it forms the core of the so-called *Itihasa*, the two major epic works of Hinduism written in Sanskrit. The *Mahabharata*, made of nearly 200,000 verses, has a very complex plot that joins wars, adventures, and philosophical meditations.

[4] The word *Duniya* designates the world outside the House of Dreams.

[5] The episode illustrates the reason why *hjiras* claim that Iravan is their progenitor and call themselves "aravanis."

[6] In February 2002, a train coach was mysteriously burnt and fifty-eight Hindu pilgrims, returning from Ayodhya, were burned alive. The riot was a three-day moment of inter-communal violence in West India between Hindu and Muslims that caused the death of more than 1,000 people.

[7] In Islamic belief, the word *Jannat* indicates the heavenly place where the righteous will dwell after their life on earth.

[8] During the 2004 electoral campaign, 'India Shining' was the theme slogan by the then-ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The propaganda formula aimed at promoting the sense of economic optimism in a country full of contradictions.

[9] In December 1984 a gas leak from the Union Cardibe pesticides plant in Bhopal, central India, caused the death of thousands of people. Roy's allusion to such an environmental catastrophe, with images of "deformed babies, misshapen aborted foetuses in bottles of formaldehyde bottles and the thousands who had been killed, mimed and blinded" (Roy 2017, 111), highlights her postcolonial critique against the major corporations that have spoiled the ecological beauty of the Indian subcontinent.

[10] The Naxalite riots erupted in the village of Naxalbari, West Bengal, in 1967. Here, the leaders of the local Communist Indian Party (belonging to the Maoist faction) started to support the revolts by agricultural laborers against local landlords, an upheaval that gradually expanded to other Indian areas where a rural feudal system, based on farming and agriculture, still prevailed. The expansion of the riots was firmly opposed by the West Bengal communist cabinet, while on the streets of the main cities and in college campuses demonstrations broke out in defense of peasants and against the violent slaughter of insurgents by the governmental police.

[11] The character of Garson Hobart appears in *Norman, is That You?* (1970), a romantic comedy, dealing with the question of homosexuality, by the American playwrights Ron Clark and Sam Bobrick.

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